

The Dark Side

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The mood in the squad car is a rather pensive one; the night does not really compel mindless chit-chat, nor do either of us seem to be in the mood to engage in idle banter. Jim Reed is adrift in his thoughts, staring moodily out the passenger window, worrying a thumbnail with his teeth like a dog gnawing on a bone. I am quiet in the driver's seat, not sure whether to be grateful for once for the silence, or curious as to why Reed is so morose. I opt for the former, deciding that whatever is eating at my partner, he will let me know what it is when he's ready to, since Reed is usually unable to keep his thoughts to himself for any lengthy period of time. Even the radio is strangely silent, no burglar alarms, no robberies, no domestics, no car wrecks. No drunks, no bar brawls, no runaway kids. The few calls that have gone out over the air have been dispatched to other units. But not us, for some odd reason. It's as if Officers Malloy and Reed in One-Adam-12 have been completely forgotten. I consider asking Reed to call dispatch and test it, to see if it works, but I decide against it. Let us not tempt fate, let us not awaken the sleeping giant, let us not poke snoozing dogs. For it is nearly dead certain, that the exact moment I ask for a radio test, all hell will break loose, shattering the fragile peace we are currently enjoying. Let the calls go to the other units; for once, I don't mind just cruising around in the squad car, and I'm pretty sure Reed doesn't care, either. He's too busy chewing that thumbnail of his to notice that our jurisdiction is quiet.

In this kind of weather, neither of us really wants to leave the warm confines of the vehicle anyway. Chilly rain pounds the roof of Adam-12, dancing in sheets across the headlight beams, the wipers barely squitch-squatching the torrential downpour away. Lightning cuts jagged seams across the inky sky, outlining in forked fingers the shapes of angry boiling clouds. Thunder growls and rends the air, grumbling and mumbling its displeasure, and I amuse myself by counting the seconds between the flashes of lightning and the roar of the thunder. The wind tugs and pulls at the car, yanking on it like a child wanting to play, and at times I am hard-pressed to keep the black-and-white firmly on the road. It's a good night to stay indoors, maybe enjoy a cozy little fire in the fireplace, settle down with a good book, one that grips you so firmly in its grasp that by the time you've come to the end, the fire has long since died down and everyone with common sense has gone to bed already. Or maybe you could enjoy a beautiful night of romance with a pretty girl by that same fire, one that begins with a quiet dinner and wine, and ends with the two of you creating a fire of your own in bed. That's the best kind of night.

But what do I know? The last book I read that kept me turning the pages well past my bedtime was *The Maltese Falcon*, by Dashiell Hammett. It's an old favorite of mine, so I already know the ending before I read the beginning, but I re-read it once in awhile just for kicks. And the last time I enjoyed a night of romance with a pretty girl, it was because she was leaving the next day to pursue a modeling career in New York, and wanted one last passionate night to remember us by...not that there was much of an "us" to begin with, it was more like two strangers in the night, exchanging glances, just like the Frank Sinatra song. But like I said, what do I know? I'm just a cop. And if I get any more moodier here, I'll be outbrooding Jim Reed, the King of Moroseness. He is still chewing at that thumbnail; if he keeps it up, by the end of our watch, he'll have it gnawed down to the bone. I don't think his wife, Jean, will like that very much, since when she sent him off to work tonight, he still had a usable thumb. And like a good partner, I'm supposed to keep an eye on Mr. Moodiness, protecting him from harm, but I'm not sure what category keeping him from chewing his thumbnail off falls into. I glance over at him, just to

make sure he's still alive, then I go back to concentrating on keeping us from ending up roadkill in blue uniforms.

"They say that everyone has a dark side to their personality. Do you believe that, Pete?" Reed asks quietly, simply, and completely out of the blue.

I shrug, not exactly sure why this strange topic of conversation has popped up and where it is headed. "Depends. Who's they?"

"Some psychiatrist. I read about it in an article in one of Jean's magazines the other day. It got me to thinking."

"Since when did you start reading Jean's magazines?" I ask. "I had you pegged more as a Popular Mechanics or a Field and Stream kind of guy."

He shoots me a glare. "Does it matter where I read it, Pete? So what if it was in a ladies' magazine? Can't a guy read Good Housekeeping?"

I snort. "Yeah, I guess. But if you come to work dressed in an apron, and start discussing recipes and the proper ways to vaccum and dust, I'm LEAVING you at the station and asking Mac to assign me to an L-car."

"You know, that's kind of chauvinistic, Pete. No wonder you're not married. No woman could put up with that kind of attitude for very long without belting you one."

"Hey, I'm all for equal rights," I say. "I'll even let her get in a free shot at me."

"Make sure that free shot isn't with a gun, Malloy," he says dryly. "You know what your problem is, Pete?"

I roll my eyes. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me. Say, doc, will this psychoanalysis cost me anything? Or do you charge by the neuroses? I can only afford crazy on the installment plan."

He stares at me for a moment. Then he turns his gaze back to the view outside the passenger window. "Forget it, Pete. Forget I mentioned it."

"No, you were saying something about everyone having a dark side. I want to hear it."

"Hmph."

"Okay, okay, I won't tease you about reading it in a women's magazine. Now what did the article say? Tell me. Now my curiosity is piqued."

"Well, according to this psychiatrist, everyone has a dark side to their personality. From celebrities to the common people."

"Even the Pope?" I ask. "I can't imagine the man who has a direct line to God could have a dark side. Unless it has something to do with his hat. Having to wear that frequently would make anyone have a dark side. Or what about babies? They're born innocent, so how could they have a dark side?"

"I knew you were going to poke fun at me," Reed says, somewhat resentfully. "I can't have a serious conversation with you at all."

"Sorry. I won't pick on you anymore, I promise. Scout's honor."

"Interesting you should say that, since you were never a Boy Scout."

"What can I say? The idea of collecting merit badges just didn't appeal to me when I was a kid. I was more interested in collecting comic books and baseball cards." I look over at him. "Anyway, go ahead. Everyone has a dark side to their personality. Even the Pope."

"Yeah, this psychiatrist was saying that all humans have a dark side. It can manifest itself in kids as young as 5. It affects most people in the form of mild depression, anger, jealousy, or bad thoughts towards others, but they don't generally act on any impulses they might have to do harm to themselves or others."

"So you're saying that every time I wish Ed Wells would transfer to Timbuktu, or contract a case of permanent laryngitis, that's the dark side of my personality showing?"

"No, that's just wishful thinking, Pete, and I think most of us in the department has harbored those thoughts, or worse, against Wells at one time or another." Reed clears his throat. "Anyway, people that enjoy purposely causing the suffering of others for their own enjoyment has let their dark side take over. They have no regard for anyone or anything."

"So you read an article about people and their dark sides. We deal with the results of that every day. Tell me something I DON'T know."

"Like I said, it got me to thinking."

"About what? Becoming a psychiatrist? In this job, we're already psychiatrists, not to mention referees, social workers, counselors, and saints. And we're also villains when we arrest someone or write someone a ticket. I don't mind being called a saint, but a villain? It doesn't have quite the same ring to it, especially if it's punctuated with curse words."

Reed ignores me and plunges ahead. "Don't you have a dark side, Pete?"

I shrug. "I dunno. Maybe. I'm not much for navel-gazing, you know. Unless it's the navel of a pretty girl. Then I don't mind, as long as it's her navel I'm gazing at."

"How profound, Pete. You just admitted one fact."

"What's that?"

"You're shallow."

"Now wait a minute," I say. "I'm not shallow. I'll take a girl with common sense any day over a bubble-headed bimbo with absolutely none."

"Oh yeah? What about Jean's old college friend, Diane? One date and you dumped her. She was pretty, smart..."

"And she hadn't shaved since high school," I point out. "I don't dig chicks with armpits hairier than mine. And in case you didn't notice, she was not well-acquainted with deodorant."

He grimaces. "Oh, yeah, I remember. I thought it was Jean's casserole that smelled bad that night."

"I'd have been better off dating the casserole than Diane," I say. "At least the casserole wouldn't have argued politics all night. Anyway, why are you worried about having a dark side? Are you afraid you've got one?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"So? As long as you don't start whacking innocent people with your nightstick, what's the problem?"

"I don't know, Pete, I really can't explain it."

"Try. Enlighten me, Sigmund Freud."

He shrugs. "Maybe I'm just beginning to get burned out on the job, ya know? I'm definitely beginning to take a dim view of things, that's for sure."

"So? We all do, at one time or another. But that too, shall pass." I glance over at him and see that's he's starting to brood again. "So what's got you thinking that you're beginning to get burned out on the job?"

"You know that accident we worked the other day? The one that the mother and little boy were hit head on by the drunk driver and killed? And the drunk walked away without a scratch? And he didn't even seem to care that he'd killed two innocent people?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"It really got to me, Pete. I know we're not supposed to get emotionally involved with the calls we go on, but that one hit home for me. I kept thinking that it could've been Jean and Jimmy in that car; after all, Jean's the same age as that woman that died. And the way that her husband collapsed when we did the death notification...it was like he just suddenly lost all will to live." Reed heaves a sigh. "What if that HAD been Jean and Jimmy, and I was the one who had to be notified?"

"Well, for one thing, it WASN'T Jean and Jimmy, and second of all, you'd have friends and family that would stand by you, and help you through your grief. That poor man didn't have any family out here to come be with him. Besides, it was just a bad accident. They happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. You can't unravel the threads of fate and reweave them to your liking, just because the mother and son reminded you of your own family. You know as well as I do, Jim, that life is full of could've's, should've's, and would've's. Happy endings are never a guilt-edged guarantee. That only occurs in the movies."

Reed clears his throat. "You know what I was thinking when we arrested the driver? That it was too bad he didn't have to suffer more for what he did. By the time his case gets through the courts, they'll have downgraded the charges and all he'll get is a slap on the wrist. Then he'll go out and drink and drive again."

"He won't walk on two vehicular homicide charges, though, Jim. He'll get prison time, don't worry."

Reed sighs. "And then we had to deal with the kids who were taken away from their mother by the state. I just know that the last thing those little kids saw was their mother sprawled drunk on the couch, hardly even aware that her kids were being seized. But they still cried and screamed for her, the whole time we were loading them into the social worker's car. I wanted to throttle that mother with my bare hands."

"Didn't the social worker say that their biological father was going to get custody of them? I thought that was why they were taken away in the first place, he sued for full custody of them against the mother and won. The kids were only going to be at McLaren Hall for the weekend, until their dad could pick them up. That's not exactly a tragic ending, Reed."

He continues. "Then we had the two fourteen-year-old shoplifters who were stealing just for kicks. Their parents didn't seem to care that they had to come get their kids at the police station. Both the kids and the parents just blew the whole thing off like it was no big deal. I tell you, if I'd gotten arrested for shoplifting \$200 worth of clothes, my parents would have come down on me like a ton of bricks. I'd STILL be grounded to this day."

"So we had a bad day that day. We have shifts like that. I wouldn't let it get me down."

"That's the whole thing! Everything we did that day, every single call we responded to either irritated me or angered me. That's not good, Pete. That's why I think I'm beginning to get burned out, or else my dark side is beginning to show. I told Jean about it, and she said that I need to consider taking the detectives' exam in a couple of months. She thinks that maybe I'd be better off not working the streets so much. A desk job might not be as stressful."

"Why? The detectives see just as much pain and heartache in their duties as we do in ours, Jim. You think that it's any easier for them? You'd just be trading one cross for another."

He rubs his eyes tiredly. "I know," he says. "But I can't help feeling like it's getting to be a burden for me to put on the uniform every shift." He gives me a hard stare, frowning. "You can't tell me that the crap we see day in, day out...the pain, the horror, the suffering of innocent people doesn't get to you. You can't tell me that at all, Malloy. You've been a cop for a helluva lot longer than I have, so you've seen the evil that mankind can do. Doesn't it eat away at you after awhile?" His voice is razor-tipped iron.

"Yes," I hedge, not wanting to admit that sometimes what we witness out here does prick away at me like mosquito bites to the heart, and it wears on me after awhile. I am not going to tell Reed that, though, lest I seem hardened and bitter. I wish to keep that side to myself. "I try to do things, though, that takes my mind off of the job. I leave work at work when we go off-duty. That's where it belongs."

"I wish I could be so lucky," he says sourly. "I wish I had the ability to compartmentalize everything into its neat little boxes with pretty labels. Here's work and here's home. Don't let one bleed over into the other. Heaven forbid that should happen, right?"

I shrug. "You have to develop a thicker skin, Jim, learn some coping mechanisms to deal with what we see out here. If you don't do that, you'll wind up driving yourself straight into a room with nicely padded walls, without passing Go. Putting things into their neat little boxes is the way I've learned to cope with what we experience on the job. It keeps me sane."

"So you're saying I should become immune to what we see, right?" he asks, sounding angry.

I refuse to be goaded into a fight I certainly didn't pick. "No, not immune," I tell him in a neutral tone. "Become immune and you lose your compassion, your edge. It's also a good way to wind up dead, just another picture to post on the Memorial Wall. I'm simply telling you, just don't take everything you see and experience out here to heart. That's the easiest way to get it broken, every single shift. And in this business, that's a lot of heartbreak for one person to bear." I glance over at him. "After all, you're not Atlas carrying the weight of the entire world on your shoulders. You're just Jim Reed, a Los Angeles policeman. You can't solve the world's problems in a single shift. No one expects you to do that, and you shouldn't expect it of yourself, either."

"I guess I just thought it would get easier over time," Reed mopes.

"Trust me, Junior, it doesn't. You just have to accept that and go on." I chuckle. "Maybe you should take up knitting or underwater basket-weaving to relieve your job stress. Didn't Jean's magazine give you any tips on that?"

He gives me a dirty look. "Har-dee-har-har, Malloy. I'm not getting any younger, and by the time I do decide to move up, I don't want to be jaded and bitter. I don't want to be like you, Pete."

I am stung by his words, not by the fact that he uttered them, but by the fact that he may be speaking the cold harsh truth...a truth I face in the mirror every day, but am afraid to admit to myself. "Is that what you think I am? Jaded and bitter?" I ask him quietly.

"Oooh, what's the matter, did I hit pretty close to home?" he asks snarkily. "Did I find the chink in your armor, Malloy?"

"No!" I snap. "Look, you were the one who started the discussion on dark sides to everyone's personalities and being burned out on the job! If you want to take the damned detectives' exam, go ahead and take it! You won't be any happier there than you are here, believe me. But then again, what the hell do I know? I'm just a jaded and bitter cop, according to you!" I feel my face flush with anger.

"Ah-ha!" he crows triumphantly. "You can dish it out, but you can't take it, is that right?"

I grip the steering wheel tightly, gritting my teeth. "Reed, will you just shut the hell up?"

"Fine," he says, sulking. "Forget I ever brought this up, okay?"

"As far as I'm concerned, this whole conversation never happened," I tell him icily.

"Good," he says, having to have the final say. "I wonder why the radio is so quiet this evening. We haven't had a call for over an hour. Isn't that unusual?"

"In this weather, no. Besides, keep your mouth shut about it. You're liable to bring an end the peace we've been enjoying."

And, just as I predicted, the radio crackles to life, interrupting the silence. *"One-Adam-12, One-Adam-12, copy a welfare check. See the woman, 2500 Briarcliff Road. Handle code two."*

"One-Adam-12, roger," Reed says into the mike, scribbling down the address on the notepad. "Look, Pete, I'm sorry," he says as he replaces the mike. "I wasn't trying to pick a fight with you or anything. I just kind of lost my cool. I didn't meant to upset you."

"You didn't upset me," I say, the lie slipping coolly from my lips. I can fool him easier than I can fool myself. I concentrate on the road ahead, the yellow lines quickly flashing by in bright iridescent streaks.

"I'll make it up to you. I'll buy you seven tomorrow night. We can eat anywhere you want, even at the China Garden Café, okay?"

"We'll see," I tell him.

He scans my profile with anxious eyes, trying to gauge my mood. I remain stone-faced and he gives up. "Yeah, we'll see," he mutters, more to himself than anything. Then he falls silent the rest of the way to the call.

Reed puts us code six at the residence when we arrive, and we exit the squad, hurrying across the glistening sidewalk, our feet splashing in the puddles. Since it wasn't raining when we first began our watch, the rain gear is still stowed away in the trunk of the squad, and getting it out now would get us wet anyway, thus rendering its usefulness moot. The rain drips off of our hat brims as we climb the steps to the complaintant's house. Reed rings the doorbell.

A middle-aged lady in a flowered housecoat answers the door. "Come in," she tells us, holding the door open. We step inside, our jackets already soaked in just the short trip from the car to the house. "I'm the one who called you, Officers," she says rather timidly. "I'm Mrs. Timmons."

"I'm Officer Malloy and this is my partner, Officer Reed," I tell her, taking the notebook and pen from the breast pocket of my uniform. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Well," she begins in a hesitating voice. "It's probably nothing, but about three hours ago, I heard a terrible ruckus from the house next door. It sounded like there was a horrible fight going on, with lots of yelling and screaming, and the sounds of stuff breaking. I should have called you then, but I didn't want to seem nosy."

"That's okay," I tell her. "Who lives in the house next door?"

"Melissa Walters and her three young children, two boys and a girl. She has a husband, but she threw him out about two months ago. They're in the process of getting a divorce."

"What's Mr. Walters name?" I ask.

"Stuart. Stuart Walters. He's one mean fellow, I don't mind telling you that. He used to beat Melissa and the kids something terrible. He'd punish them for the littlest mistakes. I guess she finally had enough of it and threw him out. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say."

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "Outside of the ruckus next door, what makes you think there's something wrong over there?"

"Well, for one thing, there's no lights on. Not even the porch light. Now I'm not a prying person by any means, but I do know that little Natalie, that's Melissa's daughter, is afraid of thunderstorms. Since Stuart left, every time we have a thunderstorm in the night, Melissa turns

the porch light on for Natalie. She tells her that it will keep the storm from coming inside the house. It's silly, I know, but to a six-year-old, the simplest talismans work on soothing their fears."

"Is that all?" I ask. "The ruckus and the fact that there's no porch light on?"

"Well, no..." she says, wringing her hands nervously. "About five minutes before I called you, I saw Stuart leave the house. He's not supposed to be there, Melissa has an order of protection against him. She was terrified of him. But it was him I saw, I know it was him. He left in his car, a white Ford Fairlane."

"Do you know about what year his car is?" Reed asks.

She thinks for a moment. "A '66, I believe. But don't ask me the license plate number, I don't know what it is."

"That's okay," Reed assures her. "We can get it from the system based on his name."

"I do hope everything is all right," she says. "I feel so bad for Melissa and those little ones. They're so sweet. I sometimes watch the three of them when Melissa has to go to work and can't find a babysitter." She smiles at their memory. "They're such well-behaved children. Natalie and little Andrew like to come over and help me in my garden. Of course, Andrew's only three, so he has absolutely no concept of weeds and non-weeds, but I don't mind. Flowers and vegetables can always be replanted."

"Well, we'll go over and check things out," I tell her, tucking my notepad back in my pocket.

"Will you let me know what you find out?" she asks, ushering us to the door.

"Sure," Reed tells her. "But it's most likely nothing more than a burned-out lightbulb over the porch. We'll probably find out that everything's just fine over there."

We leave Mrs. Timmons house, walking once again through the rain, the soles of our shoes skitching wetly on the pavement, our flashlight beams creating puddles of light in the storm. The Walters' residence, a tidy little ranch house, is dark, except for a light on in the basement. Reed tries to peer through the tiny window, but it is covered with layers of grime and cobwebs, and he is unsuccessful. I ring the doorbell, but it evidently doesn't work, so I knock on the screen door. "Police officers, Mrs. Walters!" I yell over the noise of the storm. "We'd like to speak with you for a moment!" There is no answer. "Let's check the windows," I tell Reed. "See if we can see anything."

"Right," he nods. "I'll take the back." He steps off the porch and heads around back.

I go over to the big picture window that faces the street. Cupping my hands at the sides of my face, I try to peer inside. The window is covered by a set of lacy sheer curtains, but I can see into the living room, at least. And I don't like what I see...a room with a lot of visible destruction

inside. I go to a window on the other side of the porch, a bedroom, I'm guessing, and try to look into that room as well. A vinyl shade is partially pulled down, but gazing into the room, I can see an iron headboard, plump pillows fluffed up against it, but nothing else. The shade to the second window is pulled completely down, not allowing me to see inside at all.

Reed comes around from in back of the house. "The windows back there are covered by blinds," he says. "But I was able to see inside the kitchen. It looks like a mess in there."

"Same with the living room," I tell him. "It looks like a tornado went through."

"What do you want to do?"

I think for a moment. "Let's try to make contact again," I say. "Maybe the doorbell doesn't work."

Reed nods. "True. I didn't hear it chime when you rang it."

I climb the cement steps to the front porch once more, this time opening the exterior screen door and rapping on the wooden entry door with my knuckles. "Police officers..." I begin to yell, as the door swings slightly open at my knock. I exchange a glance with Reed. "Something's hinky here," I tell him. "If she was afraid enough of her husband to seek out an order of protection against him, wouldn't you think that she'd keep that door locked?"

"I have a bad feeling about this, Pete." Reed shines his flashlight over the interior door. "Look," he says, pointing to a small reddish smear an inch, maybe an inch-and-a-half long on the edge of the doorframe. "Paint, maybe?" he asks.

I study it. "It's too bright to be paint. Looks like blood to me."

"Maybe we should go call for back-up," he says.

I shake my head. "It may take too long. For all we know, there may be someone who's badly injured inside and in need of medical help right now. By the time our back-up gets here, whoever's inside may very well be dead. I sure as hell don't want that on my conscience, knowing that I wasted precious minutes waiting for another unit to arrive...and I don't think you do, either, Jim." I push on the door with the edge of my flashlight, opening it wider.

"It's not protocol, Pete," Reed warns.

"So? Neither's letting an innocent person die." I cast a glance at him over my shoulder. "If you want to follow protocol, then go call for back-up and wait out here for them to arrive. Me, I'm going in." I start to step across the threshold.

"Oh, hell," Reed mutters as he follows me.

"Don't touch anything," I tell him.

"I won't," he says, nearly treading on my heels.

"Mrs. Walters?" I call out as we step inside. "Police officers! Is everything all right?" My voice bounces echoing throughout the living room. In an instant, I sense that something bad, something very, very awful has happened in here, as the storm rages and howls outside. The atmosphere inside the house is too still, too silent, save for the muted ticking of a grandfather clock in the corner of the living room. Nothing moves, not even a stray current of air. Icy tendrils of dread caress my neck as our flashlights play out over the room, casting eerie shadows that scurry spookily off at angles. A beer can sits on a burnished oak coffee table, cigarette butts escape from an overflowing ashtray. A tv sits alongside the wall across from a brown plaid couch, the screen shattered. A curio cabinet is nestled across from the grandfather clock, the remnants of broken knickknacks and geegaws strewn around it in porcelain shards. Potted plants are tipped over and dumped, the dirt spilling out onto the carpet. Lighter spots on the walls mark where pictures once hung, now they are scattered on the floor, their frames bent and broken, the glass crunching under our feet as we slowly cross the room, surveying the wreckage of someone's life. One of the pictures lies face-up, a glossy color portrait of a grinning family gathered around a huge Christmas tree, their smiles hiding the dark secrets that go on behind closed doors. The mother, a petite, pretty brunette, is seated on a chair, a plump bald infant propped on her lap. A freckle-faced little girl, her hair dark like her mother's, stands next to her mom. A small blonde boy with a head of riotous curls, sits at the little girl's feet. The father, a huge bear of a man, towers over his tiny family, his huge meaty hand clutching his wife's shoulder in a protective vise. Only the little girl is not smiling, she gazes at the camera with a frown upon her lips, a frown not of anger, but of age-old sorrow, an emotion too large for such a girl so small. A heavy cloak of unease settles upon my shoulders, and I resist the urge to run screaming from the house and all that it contains in its silence. A trickle of rain water runs a chilly finger down my back and I shiver, goosebumps prickling my skin. "This is not good," I murmur, mostly to myself.

Reed hears me. "I think we should leave, Pete. Something's wrong here," he says. "We need to get back out and call for help."

"There's the door, use it," I say, nodding my head towards the open front door. "I'm going to check the rest of the house out."

Reed points to the family picture lying shattered on the carpet. "What'd Mrs. Timmons say, there's should be four of them here? Melissa Walters and her three kids?"

"Yeah," I nod. "But I don't see any sign of them."

"Maybe they left with Stuart Walters."

"I doubt it. Why would you willingly go with someone you had an order of protection against? Besides, Mrs. Timmons said she only saw Mr. Walters leaving in his car, not the whole family."

"Maybe he took them by force."

I shake my head. "No, I don't think so. Mrs. Timmons would've seen him forcing them into his car." I scan the wreckage of the living room. "I think they're still here, Jim."

Reed shudders involuntarily. "So do I."

I approach the kitchen, my feet crunching the glass into the carpeting. Reed follows close behind. Normally he and I would split up to check the rest of the house, but for some reason, we are not quite willing to follow standard procedures. There is the sense of safety in numbers in the face of whatever evil has manifested itself in this house. And I am glad for Reed's presence at my side, the idea that there's another living, breathing human being in this silent, eerily still house besides me, gives me a semblance of comfort. There is nothing more reassuring than folie á deux, a madness shared by two. Whatever hell I witness in here, I know that Reed will see it, too.

The kitchen has fared no better than the living room. Flour and sugar are spilled in miniature white mountains on the floor, the plastic canisters toppled sideways on the countertop. Drawers are yanked out, tilting haphazardly from underneath the counter. Cabinet doors are thrown wide open, broken crockery is smashed against the floor. The refrigerator door yawns halfway open, the light inside casting a pale thin sliver across the checkerboard tile, its contents dumped and tossed about. Broken eggs, ketchup, mustard, and milk all combine to form a nauseating mess. A wooden dining room table is up-ended, the tablecloth draped across it like a drunken ghost. The chairs are scattered about like four-legged matchsticks. Silverware and kitchen utensils wink up at us as it is caught in our flashlight beams. Pots and pans are metal turtles on the floor.

"Jesus," Reed breathes softly. "I thought it looked bad from the outside...this is worse. Someone must have been really pissed off to create this much destruction."

BONG! BONG! BONG!

Reed and I both jump out of our skins at the startling sound, our flashlights skittering wildly in our hands. "The clock!" we exclaim in unison, as the grandfather clock in the living room continues to chime out the midnight hour.

"Man, that scared the crap out of me!" Reed says in a shaky voice.

"It's the witching hour," I moan in a spooky voice, shining my flashlight under my chin as if I were telling a ghost story. Only the tremors in my voice are not fake, they are very much real, brought on by the chiming of the damned clock.

"Quit that!" Reed snaps at me. "My nerves are already on thin ice!"

We start down the carpeted hallway that leads to the bedrooms. Here again, family photos lie scattered about: a blue-backdropped studio shot of the three children, a triple frame of baby pictures, a black and white wedding portrait of Mr. & Mrs. Stuart Walters, the two of them holding hands in front of a church nave. He looks like he is literally stuffed into his tuxedo, any movement on his part would burst the seams of the tux completely apart. She is delicate and dainty in a poufy white satin gown, layers and layers of lace cascading down the skirt of the

gown, ending in a long train draped over the steps leading up to the nave. A fluttery veil skims her back, following the line of the gown, puddling in the satin pool of the train. They smile happily at each other, the fresh promise of their future together etched across their glowing faces.

"Looks like they started out happy," Reed says quietly, nudging the silver edge of the broken frame with his foot. "Wonder where it all went wrong."

"Dunno, partner," I say. "Sometimes what starts out as a bright flame ends up a pile of ashes that not even a phoenix could rise from."

The first bedroom we come to is the master bedroom. The door is not quite shut, and I nudge it open with the edge of my flashlight. Clothing lies thrown around, and feathers from a disemboweled pillow still drift and float lazily in front of us. Melissa Walters is on the double bed, her hands tied to the iron headboard, her nightgown pushed up past her splayed thighs, her head thrown back in agony, her face a grimacing rictus of death. Pantyhose is knotted tightly around her neck, a grotesque bow topping her body off like a gruesome birthday gift. The scene is played out in hundred-fold in the shards of a shattered mirror over a white dressing table. Face powder is dumped atop the small vanity, and the strong reek of perfume hangs cloyingly in the air, masking the smell of death. The word "whore" is scrawled out viciously in red lipstick across the wall. I cross the polished wood floor, my shoes making a clicking sound, reaching the side of the bed. I lean over the poor woman on the bed, feeling with two fingers at the side of her neck for a pulse that I know I will not find. "She's dead," I say, stating the obvious to Reed. It's quite clear that Melissa Walters' soul has long since departed her body, leaving only a violated shell behind.

A small bathroom sits across the hall from the master bedroom. Here the destruction is less extreme, perhaps owing to the fact that there was very little in the bathroom that needed to be destroyed. But just the same, the killer left his mark there, too, pulling the shower curtain down from the rod and tossing it to the floor, a silver plastic puddle of laughing mermaids, dancing fish, and smiling whales. Shampoo is dumped in the tub, and a grimy red ring lines the inside of the white pedestal sink. Bloody towels are discarded on the floor, and smears of blood mar the sink taps and faucet. The mirror here is not shattered; maybe the killer wanted to smile his satisfaction with himself as he washed the blood of his evil misdeeds down the sink. Out, out damned spot, indeed.

A white-painted door marking another bedroom is down the hall next to the master bedroom. The names "Andrew" and "Matthew" are stencilled out in bright merry colors. The room for the two little boys. A smeared palm print in crimson is near the doorknob, and a few tiny splotches of red are on the wooden floor.

Reed hesitates when we come to that door. "I don't really want to go in there, Pete," he says softly. "I don't think I can handle what I know we're going to find." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "Please don't make me go in there," he pleads.

I turn to look at him over my shoulder, the commingled beams of our flashlights casting enough light that I can see his eyes, wide with shock and undisguised revulsion, as I imagine my own

must be. "Stay out here, Jim," I tell him gently, taking pity on him. Jim Reed should not have to bear witness to whatever awful hell lies beyond that white-painted door, for I know that if he does, he will instantly think of his own young son. "I'll go check." I turn and nudge the door open with the flashlight edge. But as I step into the room, he is right behind me, keeping his head down, his eyes fixed firmly on the floor. I gasp involuntarily at what horror is unmasked before my eyes in that cheery nursery room that is wallpapered with frolicking characters from Mother Goose's fairytales. "Oh my god," I choke out, causing Reed to glance up. He quickly looks back down at the floor, his face pale.

The little blonde toddler with the riotous curls is sprawled across his bed, one tiny hand clutching a well-loved, well-worn teddy bear like it was a life preserver. His eyes are wide open, staring dead and empty at the ceiling. Dried tears and snot slick his plump little cheeks, making them glisten in the beam of my flashlights. A thin trickle of red drains out of the corners of his open mouth, he appears to be screaming blood. His yellow footie pajamas are soaked with crimson, leaked out around the huge butcher knife that sticks out of his tiny chest, pinning him to the bloody bed like he was a ghastly butterfly of death in a museum display. Once again, I cross the floor to check for a pulse, knowing that it is futile, but bound by duty to see. I gently press my fingers to his neck, shaking my head. "Dead," I whisper hoarsely. As I move my hand away from his body, I resist the overwhelming urge to close his eyelids over his clouding brown eyes, giving the small tot a measure of peace against the sight of his own excruciating death.

"The baby," Reed rasps, and I can see that he is standing there, a couple of feet inside the doorway, his eyes tightly closed. "I can't look... I can't bear to look," he moans. "Don't make me look, Pete, please don't make me look."

"Keep your eyes closed," I tell him as I cross the space between the toddler's bed and the baby's crib, careful to avoid the splotches of blood. "I'll look." Even though I really don't want to look myself, the thought of what I'm going to find fluttering coldly in my chest.

His baby brother in the crib across from him has fared no better, the killer not sparing the infant any of his wrath. His head is beaten in and unrecognizable, crushed by several blows from a hammer that lies discarded callously alongside his tiny body, bits of gore still clinging to it. Blood has dripped through the slats of the crib, settling in tacky spatters on the hardwood floor below. A mobile of ducks has been ripped from the ceiling and thrown in next to the small boy. Plaster and dust from the ceiling lightly coats the baby's body, lending it a macabré look. The killer has stepped in the children's blood, leaving red footprints on the wood floor. I don't even bother checking for a pulse on this one, he was probably dead with the first blow of the hammer. "Dear Lord," I whisper to myself. "How could anyone be this vicious?"

The sound of my voice has made Reed open his eyes and he catches sight of the whole gruesome tableau in that nursery. "Oh my god, I think I'm gonna be sick," he gulps, clapping a hand over his mouth, his face a ghostly greenish-white.

"Not in here!" I bark harshly at him. "Get outside if you're going to puke!" My voice sounds crueler than I intended, but the last thing I needed was for him to throw up all over the room.

Without another word, he turns on his heel and flees, the sound of his hurried flight echoing within the silent house. I hear the screen door bang open, the storm outside roaring loudly for a brief moment. Then I am left alone in this house of horrors, my own fear and revulsion prickling along my neck and running chilled down my spine. I carefully pick my way back across the wooden floor to the hall carpet. There is one child who remains unaccounted for: little Natalie, the woebegone child in the family Christmas picture. Her bedroom is at the end of the hall, the door and the walls painted pink. I stand in the doorway, playing the flashlight beam around the room, my eyes scanning the destruction within. Stuffed animals are thrown about, disemboweled and beheaded, their foam entrails leaking all over the room. A collection of porcelain dolls lie on the polished wood floor, their heads stamped and smashed under the tread of a heavy heel. China dust clings thickly in the air, unmoved by any air currents, and I stifle a sneeze. An upended music box eerily tinkles out "The Teddy Bears' Picnic " in merry, plinking tones. But Natalie is not here in her room. That leaves only the basement. I turn and head back through the home, once again passing the debris of a formerly happy family life.

Easing past the mess in the kitchen, I locate the basement door. Same as the others, it too, is ajar, as if the killer was in a hurry to leave each of his crimes. I hesitate at the top of the stairs, my heart thumping nearly out of my chest. My stomach gives a queasy roll, and I almost have to go join Reed outside. Instead, I swallow back the bile, willing myself not to vomit. I close my eyes tightly. Please don't make me go down there, my soul whimpers, I don't wanna see what horror is bound to be in that cellar. A slight sensation of vertigo makes me sway a little, and I force my eyes open. The sheer hell that I've seen in the house so far is enough to haunt my nightmares for weeks to come. But I was the one who made the crack decision to enter the house to check on the well-being of the occupants inside, and now I must see it out, finish it. Fear growling in my gut, I descend the wooden steps slowly, my footfalls creaking on the boards. A light glows dimly from the interior of the basement, and I steel myself for what I know I will see. I reach the cement floor of the basement, the image of what lies before me searing itself forever in my brain.

She is strung up as carelessly as a slab of beef, her hands tied over her head by a length of rope that is knotted and thrown across an overhead pipe. Her freckled face is badly bruised, dried blood crusts in the corners of her mouth. Cigarette burns litter her arms and legs, visible even through the thin fabric of her pink flowered nightgown. Whip marks from a belt or a strap of some sort mar her legs, leaving thin strips of purple-red welts. She dangles there, twisting and turning slightly in the breeze created by my approach. Blood pools on the cement at her feet, but as I stare at the horror before me, I imagine that I see her twitch slightly. I move towards her, shining my flashlight on her face, gamely searching for any sign of life, but as I get closer, I can see that she, like the others, is dead. A garish slash crosses her throat like an obscene necklace, and I shudder violently, for it is no less a brutal sight than the others upstairs. It is clear that someone took most of their anger out on this little girl, the bruises, burns and welts marking her agony. The rope overhead shifts suddenly, making her body swing towards me. I jump back with a yelp, my heart pounding furiously.

"Pete?" Reed calls distantly from upstairs. "Where are you?" I hear his tread as he walks across the floor.

"Down here," I yell shakily. "I'm in the basement!"

He appears at the top of the basement stairs, his flashlight gripped in his hand. I quickly shield the sight of the girl's body from him with my own, wishing to spare my partner the horror. He's seen enough as it is. "Hey," he says, starting down the steps. "I called..."

"Stop!" I command, holding my hand up, willing him to stay where he's at. I shine the flashlight up at him, the halo of light bright across the dark blue of his uniform coat. "Don't come down here!" My voice sounds hollow in my ears, against the blood thudding in my brain.

He hesitates for a second, then takes another step down.

"I said stop, damnit!" I snap. "Don't you listen?"

He stares at me, puzzled. "The other little kid, the girl..." he begins.

"I've found her, she's down here," I rasp hoarsely. "She's dead. I don't want you to see her."

"I've called for homicide," he tells me. "They should be here in a half-hour to forty-five minutes. I guess they're kind of busy tonight." He laughs bitterly, a laugh that I've never before heard him make. "Tonight must be a good night for murder, huh?"

"Go back upstairs and wait for them," I tell him. "Just stay in the living room. Don't go back into any of the bedrooms anymore."

He nods. "Don't worry, I won't. I don't relish losing what little is left in my stomach." Something makes him look over his shoulder suddenly at the upstairs. "It sounds like a car just pulled in the driveway," he says. "Maybe homicide's here already. I'll go see." He turns and climbs back up the steps.

I take one last look at the helpless child dangling before me like a broken marionette. On impulse, I make the sign of the cross over myself, my own version of whistling past the graveyard...a talisman to keep my soul safe against the unabashed horror and evil I've witnessed tonight.

I hear the sound of the front door banging open, the sounds of the storm once again rushing inside. I hear a man's deep voice cry out, "What the hell?" and the sound of a scuffle breaks out above my head.

"PETE!" Reed hollers. "I NEED HELP!"

I scramble up the stairs, taking them two at a time, in an adreneline-charged hurry to come to the aid of my partner and friend. At the top of the steps, I catch a glimpse of Reed struggling mightily with a bear of a man, the same one in the Christmas picture. It is only a brief glimpse, since the man breaks free from Reed's grasp to deliver a kick to my stomach, sending me tumbling backwards down the basement steps. I land dazed in an untidy heap at the foot of the stairs, sprawled on the cold cement floor on my back, the wind knocked out of me. I gasp for breath, gagging for air, the sounds of the fight upstairs ringing dimly in my ears. I taste the

coppery tang of blood in my mouth, and I realize that the fall down the steps has probably injured me, since my attempts at trying to breathe causes a catching pain in my right ribcage. But that right now is the least of my worries. I heave myself to my hands and knees, knowing that Reed is still in peril, but the next sound I hear freezes the very blood in my veins. A single gunshot cracks the air like the thunder overhead, and Reed screams in pain. I hear a heavy thud and Reed falls silent. Footsteps tread slowly towards the basement door. I am aware that I will be the next one to suffer the same fate as Reed and the others upstairs if I don't act fast. Fear drives me to my feet and I whip around, searching for the string that turns the light the light down here. I quickly locate it and give it a yank, sending the basement into darkness. I head for the shadows under the basement steps, bumping the dead girl in my haste to hide. I bite back the scream that rises unbidden in my throat, quickly concealing myself in the darkness, sliding the flashlight back into the ring on my belt. I want the element of surprise on my side. I unholster my revolver, the grip slippery in my sweaty palm, and wait for the arrival of the Devil himself.

He descends the steps casually, slowly, his breathing heavy from the exertion of struggling with Reed. In a flash of lightning, I see that he clutches Reed's weapon in his meaty hand. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," he singsongs in a bass voice. The childhood taunt sounds deathly wrong in his voice. As he reaches for the string to turn on the light, I sidle up to him in the dark, my eyes having quickly adjusted to the dimness.

"Drop it," I say when he yanks the light on. My weapon is pointed at the base of his skull, and I almost want him to turn around and draw down on me, just so I can shoot the sonofabitch. I fairly shake with anger, hatred, and disgust at this vile piece-of-crap excuse for a human being.

"And if I don't?" he sneers. The smell of rank sweat and stale beer cling to him in a nearly overpowering odor. "Whattaya gonna do, pig?"

"Blow your brains six ways to Sunday all over this basement," I growl. "And don't think that I won't mind doing it, mister."

He chuckles. "Oooh, a tough cop, huh?" He decides I'm not kidding when I jab the muzzle of my revolver against the back of his head. "Your partner upstairs thought he was pretty tough, too, but he ain't anymore. I put a bullet in him."

I refuse to betray any emotions to this man, lest it give him any kind of an edge over me. "I said drop it," I tell him coolly. "That's my last warning."

"Okay, okay," he says almost aimably. "Don't shoot. I'm putting the gun down." He gingerly bends his knees, placing Jim's revolver on the cement floor. It's tempting to just go ahead and shoot him right there; after all, it wouldn't be too hard to plead a case of self-defense on my part, especially knowing that's he's already shot Jim Reed, but I refuse to commit such a cowardly act. After all, I have to be able to face myself in the mirror every morning. Whatever vicious evils he perpetrated upstairs, it is not my place to decide his fate. Much as I wish I were, I am am not judge, jury, and executioner. After I arrest him and haul his sorry ass to jail, the fate of Stuart

Walters will no longer be my problem, save for when I testify against him at his trial. And I intend to be as cold-blooded in my testimony as he has been in what he's done upstairs.

"Over against that toolbench," I order him in a sharp voice, prodding him none too gently with the gun. I kick Reed's weapon away from us as we cross the floor to the workbench, sending it skittering across the cement. There are tools on the bench that he could grab and use against me, but I am not going to give him that chance. "Hands behind your head, interlace your fingers." I kick his feet apart, my shoe purposely connecting hard with his left ankle. I smile at his wince of pain.

He meekly obeys me, interlacing his fingers behind his greasy head. It seems that all his bravado has left him, but I am still wary. Gripping a handful of his shirt in my fist, I holster my weapon, but leave the guard unsnapped. I take the handcuffs from the case on my gunbelt, snapping one cool metal bracelet onto his left wrist, maneuvering it down behind him so I can hook the other wrist, binding his hands behind his back. I'll be damned if I read him his Miranda rights before I get him cuffed up. There's something about his attitude that I don't trust. I lean my weight into him in an attempt to discourage any thoughts he might have about fighting me. I grasp his right wrist, and as I start to bring it down to lock it in the other handcuff, he writhes suddenly in my hands, a live wire dancing in my grip, throwing me off-balance. I realize too late that I have made a grave error in assuming that he'd given up the fight. His sudden meek acquiescence masks the deeper desire to remain free. I make a lunge for him, but he darts away, swinging the handcuffs up to meet me, the open cuff catching me across the right side of my face, slicing into my cheek. Blood immediately begins to trickle down my face as I quickly react, following his blow, rabbit-punching him in the face on his downswing. I grab a fistful of his shirt in one hand, using my weight to drive him backwards into the toolbench. My left forearm tight against his throat, gripping his collar, I desperately try to catch ahold of his wrist that has my handcuff on it.

With a bellow, he pushes me off of him like I'm a mere speck of dust, scrabbling for something on the workbench behind him. As I stumble backwards, I see that he has grabbed up a wooden mallet. He swings at me, catching me on the left shoulder. It burns sharply with pain, but I dance away from him, grabbing the string to the light and yanking on it, plunging the basement into darkness once more. The string comes off in my hand and I drop it to the floor. I dive into the shadows under the steps, hoping that the pounding of my heart and my ragged breathing won't give me away. I can only catch minute glimpses of him in the nearly-constant flickering of the lightning overhead. As it casts the scene out in a strobe-light frenzy, I see him reaching into his pockets for something. I hear the rasp of a lighter wheel as he gives it a flick of his thumb, and he holds the lighter before him, searching on the ground for something. He kneels and picks it up...Reed's revolver. I bury myself even deeper in the darkness, trying to be as still as a little mouse. My fingers close around my gun, drawing it from the holster, hoping the sound won't give me away. He grasps the lighter in front of him, the flame doing little to cast light less than a few inches beyond his face. Still, he scans the inky blackness before him, his eyes fearful and darting. He searches, trying to pinpoint my exact location.

"C'mon, piggy, squeal," he mutters. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," he once again singsongs.

I maintain my position, trying to quiet my breathing. My shoulder is aching and my cheek stings, but I don't move. Jungle drums pound out a vigorous tattoo in my head and sweat rolls down my face.

"C'mon, little piggy," he says again. "I shot your partner upstairs, you ain't gonna escape the same fate." He takes a wary couple of steps as the storm above us reaches its crescendo, the lightning dancing wickedly, the wind howling, and the thunder shaking the house over our heads. "C'mon," he whines, waving the lighter in front of him.

I grasp the revolver in my right hand, feeling the reassuring weight in my palm, the trigger sliding easily over my index finger. I wait patiently. Time seems to tick by in eons and eternities.

He hears something, probably an imaginary sound in his own brain, and he swings Reed's weapon around in front of him, his eyes busily attempting to search out my niche in the blackness of the basement. He licks his lips nervously. "C'mon," he rasps, his breaths panting and ragged. "Make it easier on yourself."

In the darkness, I smile.

He advances slowly, his steps hesitating and ponderous. As he continues to wave the lighter in front of his sweating face, his finger tightens on the trigger of the gun. He continues forward, and I let him. He approaches my hiding spot under the stairs, where I am tucked noiselessly away, my eyes gauging his every step. I can smell his rank odor rolling off of him like a noxious cloud. The evening of gruesome, gory violence is going to stop right here, right now, in this dank, cobwebby basement, ending in death for either him or me. And I SURE as hell don't intend it to be me.

Dimly I am aware of a sound over our heads, a scraping, shuffling sound. There is the thud of someone falling against the basement doorframe. "Pete," Reed moans. "You okay down there?" He scrabbles for the light switch at the top of the stairs, flicking it on.

In that instant, I pull the trigger and fire, the revolver leaping in my hands, the sound echoing loudly throughout the basement. Stuart Walters' head pops like a ghastly balloon, as he crumples and topples backwards, Reed's weapon clattering to the cement.

Reed stumbles down the wooden stairwell as I step out of my hiding spot, blinking in the sudden brightness, the sound of the shot still ringing in my ears. He reaches the bottom of the stairs, one hand gripping the wooden railing, the other clutched to his side. Blood seeps out from between his fingers and a nasty purplish bruise graces the right side of his face, extending into his hairline. His lip is split and bleeding, and his right eye is starting to swell shut. His hair sticks damply to his head. He gazes at the killer's body on the cement floor before him as I gingerly edge past the dead man. "He came back," Reed says in a whisper. "He was evidently going to torch the place. There's a can of gasoline upstairs." He sways unsteadily on his feet, clutching the stair rail for support. He winces, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth through the pain. When he speaks again, his voice is hoarse. "You shot him," he says simply, as if just now coming to the realization of what I've done.

"Yeah, I shot him," I say, nodding my head, as Reed's eyes flick up to meet mine. I can see a glimpse of something in them. Is it shock? Horror? Disbelief? Its steely admiration and grim respect. Bruised, battered, and weary, the two of us shocked and sickened to the core by what we've experienced tonight, we stare dazedly at what used to be a human being sprawled in front of us, the stench of cordite and copper hanging thick in the air. We are silent for a moment and then I speak. "I had no other choice, Reed. I thought he had already killed you, and I knew I was next..."

Reed interrupts me with a raspy cough. "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 say, a cool and calm tone to my voice. Jaded and bitter? After this evening's atrocities, you're damned right I am. I gesture to the body of Stuart Walters crumpled on the floor before us. I chuckle grimly, mirthlessly. "I'm thinking, so I shot the sonofabitch...and I'm glad that I did. I'm not sorry. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

Reed stares at me, puzzled and frowning. He's never seen this facet of Peter Malloy before.

Oh yeah, baby, everyone has a dark side...even me.