



**SYNOPSIS:** Hammer finds himself up against a clever serial killer targeting only cops. A killer his old friend Captain Pat Chambers had put away many years ago is suddenly freed on new, seemingly indisputable evidence, and Hammer wonders if this seemingly placid, very odd old man might somehow be engineering cop killings that all seem to be either accidental or by natural causes. At the same time Hammer and Velda are dealing with the fallout – some of it mob, some of it federal government – over the \$89 billion dollar cache the detective is (rightly) suspected of finding not long ago.

## CHAPTER THREE

There was a bite in the air that whispered across the new cemetery grounds. Summer wasn't long past and autumn was disappearing quickly, the sky gray but the clouds immobile and the smell of possible rain faint.

In the background the concrete spires of the city's skyscrapers made tombstones of their own, adults looking down on their boneyard offspring.

The stillness was a kind only death could engender. It was an eerie quietness as though the small audience was holding its breath and for a while there was no sound of birds or traffic. No plane flew overhead. No insect made a chirp. From twenty feet away you could hear the rustle of the fabric of the flag being folded geometrically until it was completely tucked into a neat unit that would be a family's tangible remembrance of a dedicated policeman.

The rifle volley from the VFW honor league erupted into a farewell salute, the smell of cordite dredging up sudden, wild memories of distant killing fields.

When the lieutenant from the Two One handed the cloth offering to the pretty young woman with the baby in her lap, she took it absently, silent grief making a blank mask of her face, her eyes looking far past the rows of ornamented tombstones, not focusing on anything at all. She held the flag against herself, the baby's tiny hand grasping the corner of it for a moment.

Beside me, I heard Pat let his breath out softly. It was rare that I saw him in his captain's uniform, but although the stamp of the career officer was there in his demeanor, that tight glint in his eyes reflected his hatred for cop killers.

Quietly, I said, "She's awfully young, Pat."

"Twenty-two," he told me. "He was twenty-six."

"Damn."

"Eighth officer lost in two months."

I nodded. It had been another one of those freakish occurrences—a cop on his way home from work caught in the hail of automatic fire from a stolen car in a drive-by shooting that took out three teenagers from the Red Commando gang... and one young off-duty officer.

The drive-by crew had missed a fourth Red Commando hoodlum, who got off two shots from the .38 automatic he carried under his shirt and a lucky hit took out a shooter in the back seat, his buddies dumping him off in an alley to bleed to death.

Just before the ceremony, Pat had been on his cellphone and I knew something had turned up. I half-whispered, "They got a lead on this one yet?"

Muffling his voice, Pat told me, "They pulled in every gangbanger in that car. The one they tossed out fingered them before he died."

"Sometimes justice gets a shabby delivery system."



A day had passed since I'd stepped off an elevator at the Hackard Building into what was damn near my own funeral. Nothing related had happened since, other than Pat reporting that ballistics had run the slugs through the local and federal databases and come up empty. We'd been right that either a new weapon had been used or an old one with the firing pin and barrel switched out.

When we'd spoken on the phone, Pat mentioned this latest officer death and that he was heading out for the funeral. I asked him if he'd like some company and he took me up on it. I'd never met the deceased, but I'd known hundreds of his dedicated kind.

Riding back to the city we didn't say much. I picked up the two New York papers on the seat and checked out the front pages. The big story was the outbreak of police officers' deaths. News was slow enough that the coverage made speculative noises about possible serial killing, but that just didn't seem the case. These appeared purely coincidental, the kind of accidental deaths that could happen to anyone.

The rash of cop fatalities had started with a drunk running a red light and nailing a pedestrian crossing the street who happened to be a uniformed patrolman an hour from going off duty.

The next death came courtesy of a delivery van blowing a tire and plowing into a squad car, killing the driver and injuring his partner.

Fatality number three was assisting at the scene of a grocery store fire when a gas main blasted a ball of flame onto the street and consumed the cop who had waved civilians back.

Four and five got it when they were responding to a robbery in progress call at a liquor store. They were only a block away when the silent alarm touched off by the owner alerted them. They had spotted the pair with drawn guns through the store window, but not the other two waiting across the street in a darkened getaway car. Those two had rifles. Each one got off three shots, dumping both cops dead on the sidewalk. The store was robbed and the four hoods got away, the owner a fatality, too.

Six and seven were having supper together in an old Italian restaurant on Third Avenue. Once upon a time it had been a big favorite with the mob crowd, but for the past thirty years had been respectable enough to get top ratings in the places-to-eat-in-New-York columns. Then, after spending thirty-five years in Sing Sing, a cancer-riddled Monte Massino came in to commit suicide in his favorite old bistro, spotted two cops in uniform and decided to pull a grand slam, shooting them both in the head before blowing his own brains out.

We had just buried the eighth.

"Serial killing by coincidence," I said.

Pat gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Crazy. Do you know what the statistician says the odds are for this many cop fatalities in this short a time?"

"The NYPP has a statistician now?"

"No, but the city does. Anyway, the expert says it's about ten times the likelihood of winning the Irish Sweepstakes."

"People do win that."

"I know you're the rare cop type who believes in coincidence, Mike. But this is way off the charts."

"Anybody looking into it?"

"I've got two teams on it, going over each death like it was a potential homicide, but so far we're treading water." He sighed. "Listen, I'm meeting Tim Darcy for lunch. You want to join us? Something you might want to get in on."

"Why not?" Tim had worked the crime beat at the News for going on twenty years and was one of the good guys—for a reporter, anyway.

Pat glanced over at me—odd, and sort of fun, seeing him in NYPD blue, like he'd been when he took down Rudy Olaf way back when.

"We'll stop by my office," he said, "so I can get into civvies."

"Sure."



Uniform or not, Pat had checked out an unmarked Crown Vic; the trouble with such unmarked cars is that they are as recognizable on the side streets of New York City as a Jaguar D-Type. Every kid with digital dexterity gave us the middle-finger salute with soundless but easily lip-read obscene suggestions as Pat coasted through, breaking up their stickball games while some players rolled out empty garbage cans and ran, waiting for us to play road hockey with the receptacles. Pat had a lot of experience with catching the cans just right and almost nailed a half-hidden perp with a galvanized missile.

“Nice shot,” I told him.

“My regular driver would have tagged him,” he told me.

“You ever try to make friends with these alley cats?”

Pat gave me a big grin. “What, and spoil all their fun? What do you think I drove up this way for?”

“I figured you took a wrong turn.”

“Like hell.” His grin got a little bigger. “I thought maybe they’d have added some new twists to the old routine. That’s what’s wrong with kids today—no imagination.”

“I notice they don’t toss out any new plastic garbage cans.”

“Of course not. Those don’t make any racket when you bang ‘em.”

There was always some logic in Pat’s observations. And I was glad to see the street skirmish get him out of his somber mood.

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