

## The Clown



**B**ecoming a law enforcement officer required an involved series of actions—psychological tests, background investigations, medical exams, and in between, the same stuff I hated most about my time in the military, which was a lot of waiting. While I progressed through each of the steps, I completed as many ride-alongs as I could. I went to the gym, where I lifted weights, ran, and talked with some of the cops I had met. Everything became about getting ready for the Academy. That part was easy. Exercising was something I'd done since I was sixteen.

For me, the ride-alongs were an opportunity to suck up, to get to know people who might help me get hired. I figured it wouldn't hurt to know a few names, which I would conveniently and not-too-subtly drop when I had my oral boards. In the true tradition of Vegas, I wasn't above using juice if it got me the job.

That's how I found myself in a black-and-white, wearing civilian clothes and listening to the pitfalls of being a cop. As I stared out the window at the passing streets, I thought about the ways my life had changed. Joey, a friend, and I were no longer roommates after he made up with his ex. The day he asked me to move out, I was only too happy. The lifestyle we had been living was killing me, but it didn't faze him at all. Joey had been able to go out after a day's work — every night — drink, smoke, then get up early the next morning, go to work and repeat the process. This was done each day on little or no sleep, and he managed to keep our boss happy, which made me believe the Army somehow physically altered and brainwashed its employees.

For me, it was all I could do to drag my sorry ass out of bed in the morning to make the plane, work all day, get home late in the afternoon, park in front of the TV for an hour until I could make an effort to pull on gym clothes, then drive the short distance to the track. Joey ran with me each night. No matter the pace I set, when we were done, he smoked a couple of cigarettes. Afterwards was the part where we ate, dressed, went to the bar, drank, played pool, and had considerably more success with the ladies, probably because we were in better shape. So, when his wife came back and I moved out, the drinking and partying stopped. My life settled into a routine of work, gym, movie or TV, and sleep. There was the occasional weekend bash, but that left a day or two so I had time to recover. I didn't have much contact with Joey as he was also getting ready for the tests to get into the Academy. Even though I was sure what he was doing was similar to my process, my life had entered a new phase.



Those were the things that were going through my mind as I watched the boring scenery — strip malls, stores, pedestrians, and traffic. It all looked the same as if I was in my own car, but I wasn't. I was in a black-and-white for two more hours. When that time was up, I was going home to my apartment filled with neat stacks of books, the TV, and the question of where life would take me if I didn't get this job. It wasn't like the test site job was going to disappear, but that I really *wanted* to be a cop. Since I'd moved out of Joey's place, I found an apartment by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, called UNLV. The complex was close to the airport and downtown, a mile from the gym, and cheap. It amazed me how fast things went up here. A year before, there was nothing but empty lots and dirt roads. Now, in what seemed like two weeks, there was a fully landscaped shopping center with mature trees, green lawns, and a parking lot full of cars, making it look as if everything had been there forever.

"This is Union area. The valley's broken up into sectors and beats," Officer Pete Dix said. "Hey, she's cute. Want to stop her?"

He hadn't been real happy to get me at the start of shift, but things were working out. I didn't do any of the stupid things he spent the first hour telling me about, such as when one of his ride-alongs took the shotgun and ran after someone he thought was fleeing from a crime. It turned out the guy was trying to catch a bus. I was embarrassed by some of the stories and particularly intrigued with one in particular. It was the story of an untrained and unarmed ride-along who chased and tackled an armed robber. "*What could be going through that person's mind?*" I asked myself. "*Did they hire him? What would I do in the same position, even if I were in uniform?*"

What I really wanted was for him to get us into something exciting. In an hour or so, it would be end of shift. This day had to go in my book as one of the most boring ride-alongs I'd ever had. Up to that point, it consisted of stopping two cars driven by busty females, having lunch at Hooters, and taking several coffee breaks at local cafes that employed cute waitresses.

"Bored?" Pete asked. I guessed he heard the lack of enthusiasm in my voice. "Want to go in early?"

"No," I said. I tried putting some enthusiasm in my voice. "I love this stuff."

"Really?" He sounded like he couldn't imagine that. "Anyway, the sectors are named after the letters of the alphabet. Have you learned them yet?"

I nodded, but he was looking the other way. He went on as though I wasn't in the car. "We call the letters by their phonetic names. This means "A" is Adam, "B" is . . ."

"Hey, Pete," I broke in. "I was military. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie . . ."

"Yeah, like that, but we don't use the military ones. You'll have to learn a whole new terminology if you get hired. Now, where was I?" He slowed the black-and-white. "Oh, yeah, baby. That's what I'm talking about. Will you look at the ta-tas on her?"

I had to admit, I stared, too. It didn't take a detective to see she wasn't wearing a bra. When she'd disappeared from sight, he continued. "Where was . . ."

“The alphabet,” I said. A vehicle, which would better be referred to as “a wreck,” pulled up next to us. The occupants were three pimply-faced, hair-to-their-shoulders, drug-addicted-looking guys who were trying hard to appear innocent. When I looked down into the car, a Saturn, which I’d been told was one of the most stolen cars in Vegas, I saw the way they had their arms at their sides, were not talking to each other, and kept their eyes straight ahead like there wasn’t a big black-and-white police car two feet away. This is exactly what I imagined criminals looked like. I eye-fucked the driver, which caused him to give me a nervous glance. This was the car stop we should have been making.

“Oh, yeah,” Pete said. When I looked at him to see if he was scoping out these guys, he was staring out the window at a convertible. “Each sector usually has four beats. Imagine if Adam area was a box and you divided it into four smaller squares. You’d get Adam One, Adam Two, Adam Three and Adam Four. Get it?”

“Yeah. Uh, Pete . . .”

He continued, ignoring me. “The shifts are: one for graves, two for days, and three for swings. So a graveyard Adam unit that’s responsible for beat one and two would be called One Adam Twelve, like in the old TV show. We’re Two Union. So what do you suppose that means?”

I shifted my attention away from the car as it made an illegal left turn. If Pete saw, he wasn’t letting on. “We’re day shift, Union sector, but I don’t know why there’s no numbers after the U,” I said.

“Fucking A right,” he said, “and if you ask me, that’s a reason to be pissed off.” He slapped the steering wheel to make the point. “It means that I’m responsible for everything that happens in Union.” What I knew from the last eight hours in Pete’s car was that Union area consisted mostly of retail businesses, some apartment complexes, and a smattering of older residences. It was the type of mix that didn’t make for a lot of crime. He’d told me that Friday afternoons, there were a few bank robberies. In the evenings, things picked up. I’d already made a decision from going on this ride along — I wouldn’t be working day shift if I could help it.

“Well, I think you get the idea,” he said.

An hour later, Pete drove down an alley. He stopped so we could talk to a couple of street people. They were sleeping off the previous night’s excesses, so Pete had to kick their feet to get them up. He asked them all kinds of questions, which they answered. I learned that one of them was a diabetic. Pete made sure he had his medicine and reminded him that he had an appointment at the VA clinic on the tenth. The other one hadn’t written to his daughter in a month. Pete said he was unhappy about that. He gave him a piece of paper and said he would be by the next day to get a letter, which he would mail.

“I don’t know how people live like that,” Pete said as we walked to the car. “In a few hours, they’ll get hungry. That starts their same old routine.” Pete explained when we were back inside. “They’ll roam up and down this alley, eating the stuff the stores throw away.”

For the next twenty minutes, we visited two other camp sites. I was amazed at the rapport he had with those people because he seemed like such a “lay-down.” The only exception to that was one young guy who looked like he should have been working. Pete told me he’d arrested the guy at least a dozen times for petty larceny and drug paraphernalia. I watched the way Pete dealt with the man, which wasn’t anything like the way he dealt with any of the others. With the other vagrants, Pete carefully made a point of being polite, civil, going out of his way to be friendly but not turning his back. He always kept a safe distance from anyone he dealt with, but with this man, before Pete even started speaking, he made the vagrant go to the front of the car where he patted him down. Pete kept his gun hand free and near his holster. He was brusque, sometimes borderline insulting. It became obvious he was trying to get the guy riled. At one point, Pete allowed himself to get close enough I thought the vagrant could have grabbed him. I could hear the insults because I was close. The whole time, Pete kept his voice down and smiled. It was weird.

“Did you see the way I did that?” he asked me after the vagrant walked away.

“Yes.”

“If he’d hit me, I’d have kicked his ass.”

“I bet,” I said. We drove forward ten feet.

“Look up there.” He pointed. I saw a camera.

“Whoever pulled that video would have seen me smiling, talking nice, and then this vagrant gets antsy on me. I’d been perfectly justified in whatever I did to him. That lesson might save you a trip to Internal Affairs someday.” This was to be my first lesson in what would later become a whole way of life. It was about good and bad cops. It was about losing that innocent attitude I’d had from the first Academy. I hadn’t done any ride-alongs then. One day I’d seen an ad in the paper, went and started the testing process, but that had not prepared me for what the street was all about. I knew something about how cops were supposed to be above the petty bounds that normal human beings spent their existence being governed by — like how sex or gambling or alcohol or drugs and a thousand other vices tempted them. It wasn’t true. We felt the same pull from those temptations and sometimes we felt we were able to taste them without the same result. In the years that have gone by since I was in that first Academy, I knew that if a person was a stupid man and became anything else in life, whether it was a cop, soldier, or priest, then all he could become was a stupid cop, soldier, or priest. Putting on a uniform or wearing a badge didn’t make people better than they were.

Finally, I had to ask, “What’s up between you and that vagrant?”

“What?” he asked.

“Come on, Pete.” The curiosity was killing me. Pete pointed a finger at the guy like it was a gun. He made a little “pow” sound.

“I want him gone, like dead. Prison-gone would be OK. That’d be a second-best case. Third would be California-gone. I’d settle for that if I had to, but dead or prison would be better. Crazy Mike is one of those people everyone’s afraid of. He likes to work the corner of I-15 and Sahara.”

“What do you mean, he ‘works?’” I asked. “I thought you said he was a vagrant.”

“He is,” Pete replied. He pulled the car a few feet forward so we were in some shade. He took out a form. “At the end of every shift, you’ll have to fill one of these out,” he said.

“OK,” I said.

Pete sighed. “I mean he *panhandles* that area. The word is he’s violent. We think he might have killed three people for working what he considers *his area*, which is under the overpass.”

“How could someone kill three people in this day and age?”

“Committing crime in those areas is different than committing crime out at The Lakes. People who live there . . .” He pointed at the cars going by at the end of the hot alley. “. . . trust the police. People who live here or next to railroad tracks or have their lunch from a garbage can, don’t. When someone gets killed in those places . . .” This time he pointed towards the distant, unseen railroad tracks. “. . . or here, might lay out for a week before the smell attracts a concerned citizen who then reports it. When you become a cop, you’ll get your share of those calls.”

I nodded. It was one of those things I wondered how I’d handle.

“It’s getting towards quitting time,” Pete said, putting the car in gear. “That means we’ll start towards the station, but we can’t go in yet. What I’ll do is drive around within a few blocks of the stable until it’s time. If you ever buy a house, remember, the safest places in the world are around police substations, especially when it gets to be shift change.” He glanced at the instrument panel. “First, we’ll head towards the gas pumps so I can top off the car for whoever gets it next.”

As we pulled out into traffic, the radio emitted a sharp noise, which startled me. I looked at the MDT — the mobile data terminal with which patrol cars are equipped — to see if a message went with the noise. It was the first time that had happened all shift.

“Alert tone. Fuck! Please God, don’t let it be my area,” Pete said. Then he grinned, “Gets your attention, doesn’t it? When you work graves, it’ll wake you from a dead sleep.”

The dispatcher announced a robbery had just occurred. She gave the location and the business name, which was a sewing store three blocks from where we were. Pete cursed under his breath.

“Here we go.” He gunned the car, telling Dispatch we’d take the scene. She said the suspect was last seen northbound on foot. The afternoon traffic had increased, which meant it took us a couple of extra minutes to

arrive. As we wheeled into the parking lot, Pete scanned the area before we headed for a spot several businesses down from where the robbery took place.

“The reason I’m parking over here is because sometimes the victims calling in are confused. I’ve walked in on these things and the bad guy was still inside. It’d be stupid to get killed because of laziness,” Pete said. He looked at the group of women standing just inside the door. “Come on, but don’t touch anything.”



Once we were inside, Pete took control. He talked softly, which calmed the female employees. My estimation of Pete’s abilities had been slowly rising since the alley.

“Who’s the manager?” he asked. A little old woman, thin as a sign post, raised her hand. He took her gently by the arm and led her aside. Pete waved for me to follow.

“I’m the owner and manager. My name’s Betty Lomox. Those five young women are my staff.”

Pete let Mrs. Lomox describe the suspect — a black male who was maybe five-feet-five inches tall, heavy, with a muscular build that might have made him weigh two hundred pounds. She said he was twenty-four years old.

“How do you know that?” The woman was obviously surprised at Pete’s question. “How can you know exactly how old he is when all the other things you’ve told me are estimates?”

“Because I can read, young man,” Mrs. Lomox said, but before she cleared that up, she went on. “He looked like he was wearing a clown outfit.”

“Clown outfit,” Pete asked. When she saw the confused looks on our faces, she continued.

“It’s as though someone drew a vertical line down his middle.” She used her finger and drew an imaginary line from her throat to her groin. She

then crossed herself with a horizontal one at her beltline. She indicated her upper right shoulder. “Red.”

“Yellow.” Left shoulder.

“Green.” Right leg.

“Black.” Left leg.

“And don’t forget his cap,” one of the girls called. “It’s the same pattern.”

Mrs. Lomox continued with a nod, “He’ll stand out like a sore thumb.”

“Hold on,” Pete told her. He turned sideways, relaying the information via radio to the ATTLing units.

“Officer,” Mrs. Lomox continued. “He had a small silver gun and he took \$333 dollars from the register.”

“What kind of gun?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know guns very well,” she replied.

Pete pulled his semiautomatic pistol from the holster with his right hand, then removed a thirty-eight-caliber revolver from behind his ammo pouches with his left.

“Did it look like this one, Mrs. Lomox?” He held up the revolver. “Or this one?” Then the semi-auto.

She indicated the semiautomatic, “Smaller though, and shiny, like it was made of silver.”

Pete radioed the dispatcher to advise the units that the suspect was armed with a chrome semiautomatic pistol.

“Now, as to how I know exactly how old he is . . . come over here,” Mrs. Lomox said. She showed us a full palm print on the glass counter.

“That’s great. Are you a palm reader?”

She just stared at Pete.

“It was a joke,” he said.

“He put his hand there,” she said, then pointed at a sheet of paper on the counter, “That’s an employment application.”

“What?” Pete asked. “He filled it out?”

“Yes. Exactly.” The expression on her face was serious. Her half glasses sat near the tip of her nose, reflecting the late afternoon sunlight that streamed through the plate glass window.

Pete lifted the paper by a corner. “I’ll be damned,” he muttered.

“Language, young man,” she said. One of the girls tittered.

“Sorry, Ma’am. I’ve just never seen anyone do this.”

“In that case, I understand.”

I could see the application was fully filled out. The suspect had printed his name, address and all his physical information. Pete noted the address was an apartment complex three blocks from our location. He keyed his mike, directing a couple of units to the location.

“Was the guy high? You know, on drugs?” Pete asked no one in particular.

“Young man, I know what drugs are. I did my share in the sixties,” she told us. “No. And he seemed such a nice, educated boy, too. He had no problems filling out the application before he robbed my store.”

I actually caught the radio traffic as a unit advised both Pete and Dispatch that they had one in custody in front of the apartment complex. Pete asked Mrs. Lomox if she would mind doing a one-on-one to see if it was the same person. She agreed, getting in the car. As we drove to the location where the unit was holding the suspect, Mrs. Lomox fidgeted in the back of the car. I felt bad for her because it must have made her think people were looking at her as if she was the criminal. After we got there, she positively identified the man. Even I saw she could hardly fail to recognize him. That was because of his clothing. There might not have been another person on the entire West Coast wearing that outfit. The officers had found a chrome Jennings semi-auto handgun and \$333 in the guy’s pockets. After the one-on-one, a swing shift unit took Mrs. Lomox a distance away to get her statement. When Pete had a second, he took time to explain the reason.

“First, I want to finish the field interview and get the paperwork done without any distractions. I also don’t want the suspect seeing she’s the one who identified him.”

The suspect, his hands cuffed behind his back, was placed in front of the patrol unit, where he waited patiently. The unloaded gun was laid on an evidence bag while an ID unit responded for photographs of the gun and money. As I stood at the side of the car’s hood, Pete handed me the guy’s ID.

“The information matches with that on the application perfectly. Notice anything else?”

I studied the card, then it hit me. “Hey! Today’s his twenty-fourth birthday.”

“According to these papers, he just got out of prison in California,” Pete said. He tossed them in front of me. “Three weeks ago.”

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Yeah, he hasn’t been out long,” Pete said as he filled in the boxes on the police reports. When he finished, Pete walked to the open passenger window. I heard him saying those familiar words I’d heard on TV so many times, “You have the right to remain silent . . .”

When Pete finished, he asked if the guy understood his rights. He nodded, but Pete had him say he understood. I stood to the side as Pete interviewed the man. The guy admitted everything that had happened at the store. When he finished confessing, Pete thanked him for being honest. We walked to another patrol vehicle, where Pete used the computer to pull up the guy’s criminal history.

“See?” he pointed at the MDT screen. “His charge in California was robbery.” He read through the guy’s local rap sheet, then called the records bureau for the FBI record which reflects a subject’s deeds in other states. “He did time in a first offender’s camp.”

“He must have wanted to go back to prison. Either that or he’s a very dumb crook,” I said.

“There’s no figuring how some people think,” Pete replied. “Hell! I probably understand him better than I do my girlfriend.” Pete looked towards the car. “Still, when you’ve been incarcerated your whole life . . . first in Juve, then in prison . . . sometimes, it’s hard to adjust to all the freedom society allows you on the outside. Maybe he went out and committed a stupid crime just so he could go back. The gun wasn’t

loaded. But it won't matter to his parole board. He's going back to prison for a long time."

I glanced to where the suspect sat, invisible behind the glare bouncing off the patrol car's windshield. I tried imagining a different car, one with another type of light on the top, a similar paint scheme, which had been copied by a local company. The suspect could have been just another man waiting in a cab for the driver to take him somewhere. There was a man who thought he had nothing to live for. At the time, I couldn't understand this attitude. Later, I was to realize people came to that conclusion for different reasons in their lives.

"Maybe, he thinks he's going home," I said.

