

Hollywood Station

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Published by Quercus

Extract

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ONE

‘Wanna play pit bull polo, dude?’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s something I learned when I worked Metro Mounted Platoon.’

‘It’s weird thinking of you as a cowboy cop.’

‘All I know about horses is they’re assholes, man. But we got the overtime there. You know my little Beemer? I wouldn’t have that if I hadn’t worked Metro. My last year in Metro I made a hundred grand plus. I don’t miss those crazy horses but I miss that OT money. And I miss wearing a Stetson. When we worked the mini-riot at the Democrats convention, a hot little lobbyist with nipples big enough to pack up and leave home said I looked like a young Clint Eastwood in that Stetson. And I didn’t carry a Beretta nine then. I carried a six-inch Colt revolver. It looked more appropriate when I was sitting on a horse.’

‘A wheel gun? In this day and age?’

‘The Oracle still carries a wheel gun.’

‘The Oracle’s been on the job nearly fifty years. He can wear a codpiece if he wants to. And you don’t look like Clint Eastwood, bro. You look like the guy in *King Kong*, except you got even more of a beak and your hair is bleached.’

‘My hair is sun-streaked from surfing, dude. And I’m even two inches taller in the saddle than Clint was.’

‘Whatever, bro. I’m a whole foot taller on the ground than Tom Cruise. He’s about four foot ten.’

‘Anyways, those pacifist demonstrators at the convention

center were throwing golf balls and ball bearings at our horses, when twenty of us charged. And dude, when you get stepped on by a fifteen-hundred-pound animal, it sucks *bad*. Only one horse went down. He was twenty-eight years old, name of Rufus. That fried him. Had to retire him after that. One of those Jamba Juicers threw a lit trash bag at the one I was riding, name of Big Sam. I beat that bitch with my koa.'

'Your what?'

'It's like a samurai sword made of koa wood. The baton's about as useless as a stalk of celery when you're up there on a horse seventeen hands high. Supposed to strike them in the clavicle, but guess what, she juked and I got her upside the head. Accidentally, wink wink. She did a loop de loop and ended up under a parked car. I saw a horse get stuck with a knitting needle by one of those tree fuckers. The horse was fried after that. Too much stress. They retired him to Horse Rescue. They all get fried sooner or later. Just like us.'

'That sucks. Sticking a horse.'

'That one got a TV interview at least. When cops get hurt, nothing. Who gives a fuck? When a horse gets hurt, you get on TV, maybe with that Debbie D-cup news bunny on channel five.'

'Where'd you learn to ride?'

'Griffith Park. A five-week course at the Ahmanson Training Center. Only horse I ever rode before that was on a merry-go-round, and I don't care if I ever ride another one. Got the job 'cause my sister-in-law went to high school with the platoon lieutenant. Horses're assholes, man. An RTD bus can pass you three inches away at sixty miles an hour and the horse doesn't blink. A little piece of paper blows in his face all of a sudden and he bucks you clear over a pile of tweakers and base heads sleeping on a skid-row sidewalk at Sixth and San Pedro. And you end up in Momma Lucy's shopping cart with her aluminum cans and refundable

bottles. That's how I got a hip replacement at the age of thirty. Only thing I wanna ride now is a surfboard and my Beemer.'

'I'm thirty-one. You look a lot older than me.'

'Well I ain't. I just had a lot to worry about. They gave me a doctor that was so old he still believed in bleeding and leeches.'

'Whatever, bro. You might have progeria. Gives you those eyelid and neck wrinkles, like a Galapagos turtle.'

'So you wanna play pit bull polo or not?'

'What the fuck is pit bull polo?'

'Way I learned, they trailered ten of us down to Seventy-seventh Street on a night when they decided to sweep a three-block row of crack houses and gangsta cribs. Whole fucking area is a crime scene. Living next to that is what razor wire was made for. Anyways, all those Bloods and Crips have pit bulls and rotties and they let them run loose half the time, terrorizing the hood and eating any normal dogs they see. And the whole fucking pack of gangsta dogs flew into a blood lust the second they saw us coming in and they attacked like we were riding T-bones and ribeyes.'

'How many did you shoot?'

'Shoot? I need this job. You gotta be richer than Donald Trump and Manny the plumber to fire your piece in today's LAPD, especially at a dog. You shoot a human person and you get maybe two detectives and a team from Force Investigation Division to second-guess you. You shoot a dog and you get three supervisors and four detectives plus FID, all ready to string yellow tape. Especially in the 'hood. We didn't shoot them, we played pit bull polo with the long sticks.'

'Oh, I get it. Pit bull polo.'

'Man, I rode through them, whacking those killer bulls, yelling, "One chukker for my team! Two chukkers for my team!" I only wish I coulda whacked their owners.'

‘Bro, a chukker is a period of play. I know ’cause I watched a special on the Royal Family. Horny old Charles was playing a chukker or two for Camilla with big wood in his jodhpurs. That old babe? I don’t see it.’

‘Whatever. You down with that or not?’

‘Yeah, I’m down. But first I wanna know, did anyone beef you for playing polo with the gangsta bulls?’

‘Oh yeah, there’s always an ABM who’ll call IA, his councilman, and maybe long distance to Al Sharpton, who never saw a camera he didn’t hug.’

‘ABM?’

‘You ain’t a ’hood rat, are ya? ABM. Angry black male.’

‘Spent my nine years in Devonshire, West Valley, and West L.A. before I transferred here last month. ABMs ain’t never been filed on my desk top, bro.’

‘Then don’t go to a police commission or council meeting. ABMs are in charge. But we don’t have hardly any living in Hollywood. In fact, nowadays most of south L.A. is Latino, even Watts.’

‘I been reading that the entire inner city is mostly Latino.’

‘Where the fuck have the brothers gone to? I wonder. And why is everybody worrying about the black vote if they’re all moving to the suburbs? They better worry about the Latino vote, because they got the mayor’s office now and they’re about one generation away from reclaiming California and making us do the gardening.’

‘You married? And which number is it?’

‘Just escaped from number two. She was Druid-like but not as cuddly. One daughter three years old. Lives with Momma, whose lawyer won’t be satisfied till I’m homeless on the beach eating seaweed.’

‘Is number one still at large?’

‘Yeah, but I don’t have to pay her nothing. She took my car, though. You?’

‘Divorced also. Once. No kids. Met my ex in a cop bar in

North Hollywood called The Director's Chair. She wore a felonious amount of pancake. Looked too slutty for the Mustang Ranch and still I married her. Musta been her J Lo booty.'

'Starter marriages never work for cops. You don't have to count the first one, bro. So how do we play pit bull polo without horses? And where do we play?'

'I know just the place. Get the expandable baton outta my war bag.'

The Salvadoran gang *Mara Salvatrucha*, aka MS-13, began at Los Angeles High School less than twenty years earlier but was now said to have ten thousand members throughout the United States and seven hundred thousand in Central American countries. Many residents of state prison displayed tattoos saying 'MS' or 'MS-13.' It was an MS-13 crew member who was stopped on a street in North Hollywood in 1991 by Officer Tina Kerbrat, a rookie just months out of the LAPD academy, who was in the process of writing him a citation for drinking in public, nothing more than that, when the MS-13 'cruiser' shot her dead. The first LAPD woman officer to be murdered in the line of duty.

Later that evening a besieged Mexican resident living east of Gower Street called Hollywood Station to say that she saw an LAPD black-and-white with lights out driving loops around a dirty pink apartment building that she had reported to the police on several occasions as being full of *Mara Salvatrucha* gang members.

On the other occasions, the officers at the desk kept trying to explain to the Mexican woman about gang injunctions and probable cause, things she did not understand and that did not exist in her country. Things that apparently denied protection to people like her and her children from the criminals in that ugly pink building. She told the officer about how their vicious dogs had mauled and killed a collie

belonging to her neighbor Irene, and how all the children were unable to walk safely in the streets. She also said that two of the dogs had been removed by people from the city pound but there were still enough left. More than enough.

The officers told her they were very sorry and that she should contact the Department of Animal Services.

The Mexican woman had been watching a Spanish-language channel and was almost ready for bed when she first heard the howling that drew her to the window. There she saw the police car with lights out, speeding down the alley next to the apartment building, being pursued by four or five barking dogs. On its second pass down the alley, she saw the driver lean out the window and swing something that looked like a snooker stick at one of the brutes, sending it yelping and running back into the pink building. Then the car made another loop and did it to another big dog, and the driver yelled something that her daughter heard from the porch.

Her daughter stumbled sleepily into the tiny living room and said in English, ‘Mamá, does chukker mean something very bad, like the F word?’

The Mexican woman called Hollywood Station and spoke to a very senior sergeant whom all the cops called the Oracle. She wanted to say thank you for sending the officers with the snooker stick. She was hopeful that things might improve around the neighborhood. The Oracle was puzzled but thought it best not to question her further. He simply said that he was glad to be of service.

When 6-X-32’s lights were back on and they were cruising Hollywood Boulevard, the driver said, ‘Dude, right there’s where my career with the Mounted Platoon ended. That’s where I decided that overtime pay or not, I was going back to normal patrol.’

His partner looked to his right and said, ‘At Grauman’s Chinese Theater?’

‘Right there in the courtyard. That’s where I learned that you never ride a horse on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.’

‘Bad juju?’

‘Bad footing.’

Sid Grauman’s famous theater seemed somehow forlorn these days, dwarfed and sandwiched by the Hollywood & Highland Center, better known as the Kodak Center, containing two blocks of shopping and entertainment. It was home to the Kodak Theatre and the Academy Awards and was overrun by tourists day and night. But the Chinese Theater still held its own when it came to Hollywood weirdness. Even this late, there were a number of costumed creatures posing for photos with tourists who were mainly photographing the shoe and handprints in the famous forecourt. Among the creatures were Mr. Incredible, Elmo, two Darth Vaders, Batman, and two Goofys, one short, one tall.

‘They pose with tourists. Pix for bucks,’ the driver said to his partner. ‘The tourists think the creatures work for Grauman’s, but they don’t. Most of them’re crackheads and tweekers. Watch little Goofy.’

He braked, making the nighttime traffic go around their black-and-white. They watched the shorter of the two Goofys hassling four Asians tourists who no doubt had refused to pay him for taking his photo or hadn’t paid enough. When Goofy grabbed one of the two Asian men by the arm, the cop tooted his horn. When Goofy looked up and saw the black-and-white, he gave up panhandling for the moment and tried to disappear into the throng, even though his huge Goofy head loomed over all but the tallest tourist.

The driver said, ‘The subway back there is a good escape route to the ’hood. Dealers hang out by the trains, and the hooks hang around the boulevard.’

‘What’s a hook?’

‘A guy that approaches you and says, “I can hook you up with what you need.” These days it’s almost always crystal.

Everybody's tweaking. Meth is the drug of choice on the Hollywood streets, absolutely.'

And that made him think of his last night at Metro, which was followed by the replacement surgery and a right hip more accurate than a barometer when it came to predicting sudden temperature drops and wind-chill factor.

On that last night in the Mounted Platoon, he and another mounted cop were there for crowd suppression, walking their horses along Hollywood Boulevard all calm and okey-dokey, along the curb past the Friday-night mobs by the subway station, moseying west, when he spotted a hook looking very nervously in their direction.

He'd said to his partner, who was riding a mare named Millie, 'Let's jam this guy.'

He dismounted and dropped his get-down rope. His partner held both horses and he approached the hook on foot. The hook was a sweaty, scrawny white guy, very tall, maybe even taller than he was, though his LAPD Stetson and cowboy boots made him tower. That's when it all went bad.

'I was talking to a hook right about there,' he said to his partner now, pointing to the sidewalk in front of the Kodak Center. 'And the dude just turned and rabbitted. Zip. Like that. And I started after him, but Major freaked.'

'Your partner?'

'My horse. He was fearless, Major was. Dude, I'd seen him chill in training when we were throwing firecrackers and flares at him. I'd seen other horses rear up on their hind legs and do a one-eighty while Major stood his ground. But not that night. That's the thing about horses, they're assholes, man.'

'What'd he do?'

'First, Major reared clear up tall and crazy. Then he bit my partner on the arm. It was like somebody cranked up his voltage. Maybe a tweaker shot him with a BB gun, I don't

know. Anyways, I stopped chasing the hook, fuck him, and ran back to help my partner. But Major wouldn't calm down until I made like I was going to climb in the saddle. Then I did something very stupid.'

'What's that?'

'I climbed in the saddle, intending to ride him back to the trailer and call it a night. I did that instead of leading him back, which anybody without brain bubbles woulda done under the circumstances.'

'So?'

'He freaked again. He took off. Up onto the sidewalk.'

The moment would be with him forever. Galloping along the Walk of Fame, kicking up sparks and scattering tourists and panhandlers and purse snatchers and tweakers and pregnant women and costumed nuns and SpongeBob and three Elvises. Clomping over top of Marilyn Monroe's star or James Cagney's or Elizabeth Taylor's or fucking Liberace's or whoever was there on this block of the Walk of Fame because he didn't know who was there and never checked later to find out.

Cursing the big horse and hanging on with one hand and waving the creepy multitudes out of his way with the other. Even though he knew that Major could, and had, run up a flight of concrete steps in his long career, he also knew that neither Major nor any horse belonging to the Mounted Platoon could run on marble, let alone on brass inserts on that marble sidewalk where people spilled their Starbucks and Slurpees with impunity. No horse could trample Hollywood legends like that, so maybe it *was* the bad juju. And very suddenly Major hydroplaned in the Slurpees and just... went... *down*.

His partner interrupted the sweat-popping flashback. 'So what happened, bro? After he took off with you?'

'First of all, nobody got hurt. Except Major and me.'

'Bad?'

‘They say I ended up in John Wayne’s boot prints right there in Grauman’s forecourt. They say the Duke’s fist print is there too. I don’t remember boots or fists or nothing. I woke up on a gurney in an RA with a paramedic telling me yes I was alive, while we were screaming code three to Hollywood Pres. I had a concussion and three cracked ribs and my bad hip, which was later replaced, and everybody said I was real lucky.’

‘How about the nag?’

‘They told me Major seemed okay at first. He was limping, of course. But after they trailered him back to Griffith Park and called the vet, he could hardly stand. He was in bad shape and got worse. They had to put him down that night.’ And then he added, ‘Horses are *such* assholes, man.’

When his partner looked at the driver, he thought he saw his eyes glisten in the mix of light from the boulevard—fluorescence and neon, headlights and taillights, even reflected glow from a floodlight shooting skyward—announcing to all: This is Hollywood! But all that light spilling onto them changed the crispness of their black-and-white to a wash of bruised purple and sickly yellow. His partner wasn’t sure, but he thought the driver’s chin quivered, so he pretended to be seriously studying the costumed freaks in front of Grauman’s Chinese Theater.

After a moment the driver said, ‘So anyways, I said fuck it. When I healed up I put in for Hollywood Division because from what I’d seen of it from the saddle it seemed like a pretty good place to work, long as you got a few hundred horses under you instead of one. And here I am.’

His partner didn’t say anything for a while. Then he said, ‘I used to surf a lot when I worked West L.A. Lived with my leash attached to a squealy. I had surf bumps all over my knees, bro. Getting too old for that. Thinking about getting me a log and just going out and catching the evening glass.’

‘Awesome, dude. Evening glass is way cool. Me, after I transferred to Hollywood I sorta became a rev-head, cruising in my Beemer up to Santa Barbara, down to San Diego, revving that ultimate driving machine. But I got to missing being in the green room, you know? In that tube with the foam breaking over you? Now I go out most every morning I’m off duty. Malibu attracts bunnies. Come along sometime and I’ll lend you a log. Maybe you’ll have a vision.’

‘Maybe I’ll get a brain wave out there on evening glass. I need one to figure out how to keep my second ex-wife from making me live under a tree eating eucalyptus like a fucking koala.’

‘Of course you’re gonna get a surf jacket soon as these hodads around Hollywood Station find out. Everybody calls me Flotsam. So if you surf with me, you *know* they’re gonna call you...’

‘Jetsam,’ his partner said with a sigh of resignation.

‘Dude, this could be the beginning of a choiceamundo friendship.’

‘Jetsam? Bro, that is wack, way wack.’

‘What’s in a name?’

‘Whatever. So what happened to the Stetson after you played lawn dart in Grauman’s courtyard?’

‘No lawn in that courtyard. All concrete. I figure a tweaker picked it up. Probably sold it for a few teeners of crystal. I keep hoping to someday find that crankster. Just to see how fast I can make his body heat drop from ninety-eight point six to room temperature.’

As they were talking, 6-X-32 got a beep on the MDT computer. Jetsam opened and acknowledged the message, then hit the en route key and they were on their way to an address on Cherokee Avenue that appeared on the dashboard screen along with ‘See the woman, 415 music.’

‘Four-fifteen music,’ Flotsam muttered. ‘Why the hell can’t the woman just go to her neighbor and tell them to

turn down the goddamn CD? Probably some juice-head fell asleep to Destiny's Child.'

'Maybe Black Eyed Peas,' Jetsam said. 'Or maybe Fifty Cent. Crank up the decibels on that dude and you provoke homicidal urges. Heard his album called *The Massacre*?'

It wasn't easy to find a parking place near the half block of apartment buildings, causing 6-X-32 to make several moves before the patrol car was able to squeeze in parallel between a late-model Lexus and a twelve-year-old Nova that was parked far enough from the curb to be ticketed.

Jetsam hit the at-scene button on the keyboard, and they grabbed their flashlights and got out, with Flotsam grumbling, 'In all of Hollywood tonight there's probably about thirteen and a half fucking parking places.'

'Thirteen now,' Jetsam said. 'We got the half.' He paused on the sidewalk in front and said, 'Jesus, I can hear it from here and it ain't hip-hop.'

It was the *Schreckensfanfare*, the 'Fanfare of Terror,' from Beethoven's Ninth.

A dissonant shriek of strings and a discordant blast from brass and woodwinds directed them up the outside staircase of a modest but respectable two-story apartment building. Many of the tenants seemed to be out this Friday evening. Porch lights and security lights were on inside some of the units, but it was altogether very quiet except for that music attacking their ears, assaulting their hearing. Those harrowing passages that Beethoven intended as an introduction to induce foreboding did the job on 6-X-32.

They didn't bother to seek out the complainant. They knocked at the apartment from which that music emanated like a scream, like a warning.

'Somebody might be drunk in there,' Jetsam said.

'Or dead,' Flotsam said, half joking.

No answer. They tried again, banging louder. No answer. Flotsam turned the knob, and the door popped open as

the hammering timpani served the master composer by intensifying those fearful sounds. It was dark except for light coming from a room off the hallway.

‘Anybody home?’ Flotsam called.

No answer. Just the timpani and that sound of brass shrieking at them.

Jetsam stepped inside first. ‘Anybody home?’

No answer. Flotsam reflexively drew his nine, held it down beside his right leg and flashed his light around the room.

‘The music’s coming from back there.’ Jetsam pointed down the dark hallway.

‘Maybe somebody had a heart attack. Or a stroke,’ Flotsam said.

They started walking slowly down the long, narrow hallway toward the light, toward the sound, the timpani beating a tattoo. ‘Hey!’ Flotsam yelled. ‘Anybody here?’

‘This is bad juju,’ Jetsam said.

‘Anybody home?’ Flotsam listened for a response, but there was only that crazy fucking music!

The first room off the hall was the bedroom. Jetsam switched on the light. The bed was made. A woman’s pink bathrobe and pajamas were lying across the bed. Pink slippers sat on the floor below. The sound system was not elaborate, but it wasn’t cheap either. Several classical CDs were scattered on a bookcase shelf beside the speakers. This person lived in her bedroom, it seemed.

Jetsam touched the power button and shut off that raging sound. Both he and his partner drew a breath of relief as though bobbing to the surface from deep water. There was another room at the far end of the hallway, but it was dark. The only other light came from a bathroom that served this two-bedroom unit.

Flotsam stepped to the bathroom doorway first and found her. She was naked, half in half out of the bathtub,

long pale legs hanging over the side of the tub. She had no doubt been a pretty girl in life, but now she was staring, eyes open in slits, lips drawn back in that familiar snarl of violent death he'd seen on others: Don't take me away! I'll fight to stay here! Alive! I want to stay alive!

Jetsam drew his rover, keyed it, and prepared to make the call. His partner stayed and stared at the corpse of the young woman. For a few seconds Flotsam had the panicky idea that she might still be alive, that maybe a rescue ambulance would have a chance. Then he moved one step closer to the tub and peeked behind the shower curtain.

There were arterial spurts all over the blue tile of the wall even to the ceiling. The floor of the tub was a blackening vat of viscosity and from here he could see at least three chest wounds and a gaping gash across her throat. At that second but not before, the acrid smell of blood and urine almost overwhelmed him, and he stepped out into the hallway to await the detectives from Hollywood Station and from Scientific Investigation Division.

The second bedroom, apparently belonging to a male roommate, was tidy and unoccupied at the moment, or so they thought. Jetsam had shined his light in there in a cursory check while talking on the rover, and Flotsam had glanced in, but neither had bothered to enter the bedroom and look inside the small closet, its door ajar.

While the two cops were back in the living room making a few notes, careful not to disturb anything, even turning on the wall switch with a pencil, a young man entered from the darkened hallway behind them.

His voice was a piercing rasp. He said, 'I love her.'

Flotsam dropped his notebook, Jetsam the rover. Both cops wheeled and drew their nines.

'Freeze, motherfucker!' Flotsam screamed.

'Freeze!' Jetsam added redundantly.

He was frozen already. As pale and naked as the young

woman he'd murdered, the young man stood motionless, palms up, freshly slashed wrists extended like an offering. Of what? Contrition? The gaping wrists were spurting, splashing fountains onto the carpet and onto his bare feet.

'Jesus Christ!' Flotsam screamed.

'Jesus!' Jetsam screamed redundantly.

Then both cops holstered their pistols, but when they lunged toward him the young man turned and ran to the bathroom, leaping into the tub with the woman he loved. And the cops gaped in horror as he curled himself fetally and moaned into her unhearing ear.

Flotsam got one latex glove onto his hand but dropped the other glove. Jetsam yelled into the rover for paramedics and dropped both latex gloves. Then they jumped onto him and tried to drag him up, but all the blood made his thin arms slip through their hands, and both cops cursed and swore while the young man moaned. Twice, three times he pulled free and plopped onto the bloody corpse with a splat.

Jetsam got his handcuff around one wrist, but when he cinched it tight the bracelet sunk into the gaping flesh and he saw a tendon flail around the ratchet and he yelled, 'Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!' And he felt ice from his tailbone to his brain stem and for a second he felt like bolting.

Flotsam was bigger and stronger than Jetsam, and he muscled the rigid left arm out from under the chest of the moaning young man and forced it up behind his back and got the dangling bracelet around the wrist. And then he got to see it sink into the red maw of tendon and tissue and he almost puked.

They each got him by a handcuffed arm and they lifted him but now all three were dripping and slimy from his spurting blood and her thickening blood and they dropped him, his head hitting the side of the tub. But he was past pain and only moaned more softly. They lifted again and got him out of the tub and dragged him out into the hallway,

where Flotsam slipped and fell down, the bleeding man on top of him still moaning.

A neighbor on her balcony screamed when the two panting cops dragged the young man down the outside stairway, his naked bloodslimed body bumping against the plastered steps in a muted plop that made the woman scream louder. The three young men fell in a pile onto the sidewalk under a street lamp, and Flotsam got up and began ransacking the car trunk for the first-aid kit, not knowing for sure what the hell was in it but pretty sure there was no tourniquet. Jetsam knelt by the bleeding man, jerked his Sam Browne free, and was trying to tie off one arm with an improvised tourniquet made from his trouser belt when the rescue ambulance came squealing around the corner onto Cherokee, lights flashing and siren yelping.

The first patrol unit to arrive belonged to the sergeant known as the Oracle, who double-parked half a block away, leaving the immediate area to RA paramedics, Hollywood detectives, evidence collectors from Scientific Investigation Division, and the coroner's team. There was no mistaking the very old patrol sergeant, even in the darkness. As his burly figure approached, they could see those pale service stripes on his left sleeve, rising almost to his elbow. Forty-six years on the Job rated nine hash marks and made him one of the longest-serving cops on the entire police department.

'The Oracle has more hash marks than a football field,' everybody said.

But the Oracle always said, 'I'm only staying because the divorce settlement gives my ex half my pension. I'll be on the Job till that bitch dies or I do, whichever comes first.'

The bleeding man was unmoving and going gray when he was blanketed and belted to the gurney and lifted into the rescue ambulance, both paramedics working to stem the now oozing blood but shaking their heads at the Oracle,

indicating that the young man had probably bled out and was beyond saving.

Even though a Santa Ana wind had blown into Los Angeles from the desert on this May evening, both Flotsam and Jetsam were shivering and wearily gathering their equipment which was scattered on the sidewalk next to a concrete planter containing some hopeful pansies and forget-me-nots.

The Oracle looked at the blood-drenched cops and said, 'Are you hurt? Any injuries at all?'

Flotsam shook his head and said, 'Boss, I think we just had a tactical situation they never covered in any class I've taken at the academy. Or if they did, I fucking missed it.'

'Get yourselves to Cedars for medical treatment whether you need it or not,' the Oracle said. 'Then clean up real good. Might as well burn those uniforms from the looks of them.'

'If that guy has hepatitis, we're in trouble, Sarge,' Jetsam said.

'If that guy has AIDS, we're dead,' Flotsam said.

'This doesn't look like that kind of situation,' the Oracle said, his retro gray crewcut seeming to sparkle under the streetlight. Then he noticed Jetsam's handcuffs lying on the sidewalk. He flashed his beam on the cuffs and said to the exhausted cop, 'Drop those cuffs in some bleach, son. I can see chunks of meat jammed in the ratchets.'

'I need to go surfing,' Jetsam said.

'Me too,' Flotsam said.

The Oracle had acquired his sobriquet by virtue of seniority and his penchant for dispensing words of wisdom, but not on this night. He just looked at his bloody, hollow-eyed, shivering young cops and said, 'Now, you boys get right to Cedars ER and let a doc have a look at you.'

It was then that D2 Charlie Gilford arrived on the scene, a gumchewing, lazy night-watch detective with a penchant

for bad neckties who was not a case-carrying investigator, his job being only to assist. But with more than twenty years at Hollywood Station, he didn't like to miss anything sensational that was going down and loved to offer pithy commentary on whatever had transpired. For his assessments they called him Compassionate Charlie.

During that evening's events on Cherokee Avenue, after he'd received a quick summary from the Oracle and called a homicide team from home, he took a look at the gruesome scene of murder and suicide, and at the bloody trail marking the grisly struggle that failed to save the killer's life.

Then Compassionate Charlie sucked his teeth for a second or two and said to the Oracle, 'I can't understand young coppers anymore. Why would they put themselves through something like that for a selfsolver? Shoulda just let the guy jump in the tub with her and bleed out the way he wanted to. They coulda sat there listening to music till it was over. All we got here is just another Hollywood love story that went a little bit sideways.'