

TINY DETAILS

by

David Wilma

I

WEDNESDAY MORNING

A preschool, even a preschool in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, did not receive this type of phone call.

“You are about to execute an innocent man,” the voice said. “Sallie Saxton was strangled in a house on Patterson Street before she was dumped at the construction site.”

Although the caller spoke slowly and clearly, Ralph Flores, Director of Hilltop Early Childhood Education Center, could not comprehend the words. When Vicky called him to the phone, he expected some salesman or a parent with another excuse for being late, so the sentences did not fit into his world of talking animals, small bladders, and short attention spans. But when the information connected to a far corner of his memory, it triggered a visceral reaction he had tried to forget even existed. At the instant of understanding, acid

flowed involuntarily into his stomach and a nude body came into focus, crumpled in the bottom of a ditch, covered with blood and dirt. Before Flores fully adjusted to his surprise, the next statement slapped him angrily in the face.

“She had a tattoo on her left breast,” the man continued, “and it was cut away. Skinned. A rose. Someone else killed her.”

Flores forgot Story Time and struggled frantically to recover long-dormant skills, once second nature. Hurry, he said to himself, do not let the caller go. Ask the right questions. Slow down. Flores recovered some composure and unlocked memories he thought he had stored away forever.

“How do you know all this?” he asked.

“Her killer told me,” the man replied. He sounded coherent and educated. An Irish brogue crept into the word “killer.” Flores heard none of the subtle signs of psychosis that any cop, indeed almost any resident of LA, readily recognized, such as disjointed sentences and mumbling.

“Why did he tell you that?”

“I cannot say.”

In one week, child molester Arthur Millston would die by lethal injection for the special circumstance murder, five years before, of Sallie Saxton. “Was it Arthur Millston who told you?” Flores asked.

“No, it was definitely not Arthur Millston. Arthur Millston may be many things, but he did not kill that woman.”

“Who killed her?”

“I cannot tell you.”

As his heart rate slipped gradually back toward normal, Flores rummaged through his brain for some more technique, a bit of art. “That’s certainly not much to go on,” he said. No answer. “How did you get this number?”

“I saw your name in *The Times*,” the man answered. “You’re in the book.” A reporter had recently tracked down Flores for a quote on the case. (“I’m retired. No comment.”)

“You should call the LAPD. Do you have their number?” Flores offered.

“They don’t seem to be interested. I spoke to an Officer Sanchez. She said there was nothing they could do.” Flores knew Bertha “Boom-Boom” Sanchez to be the laziest cop to ever pencil-whip a time sheet.

“Can you give me more details?” Flores asked.

“I cannot tell you who the killer is.”

“You don’t know or you won’t tell me?”

“I cannot and I will not tell you.”

“But you know who he is.”

A pause. “Yes.”

“Why won’t you tell me who he is?”

“I cannot.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

The answer was a confident “No.”

“Can I meet with you?”

The man had his answer ready. “Yes.”

“When can I see you?”

“Right now. I’m downtown. I can come meet you.”

“NO!” Flores said then softened his harsh reaction. “Ah, there’s no place to talk here.” Flores ran through all the locations in the neighborhood where he used to meet informants. “Do you know that Chinese deli on Second in Japan Town?”

“Happy Valley, yes.”

“Half an hour?”

“Half an hour.”

After hanging up, Flores went to the storeroom where he pushed aside a piñata and Halloween pumpkins looking for the cardboard box containing an old notebook and the few remaining pieces of his police career.

II

Ralph Flores, Police Detective III (Retired), had laid down twenty-five years of serving and protecting the citizens of Los Angeles for a new life running Hilltop with his wife and son. Instead of witnessing autopsies, sifting lies, and navigating a mindless legal system, he now supervised gender-neutral, culturally diverse games and carefully evaluated which book to read aloud next. Once adept at sweating confessions out of suspects and numbed to falsehoods – many of them official – he now patiently listened to mothers convinced that their darlings were the brightest, most beautiful children in the school, naturally deserving of his special attention. And rather than tuning out gossip about who is on their way up and who is on their way out, he listened carefully for the microscopic conflicts that were nothing less than monumental to four-year-olds. The widest extreme of antisocial behavior now resided not with serial killers, impulse killers, and accidental killers,

but with the likes of Matthew Sarmenian, who could never seem to sit still, stay with his group, or keep out of trouble.

Instead of teaching children and juggling parental politics, though, Ralph Flores sat once again across a sticky table from an informant. He faced a portly, sixty-year-old with gray hair once red and a nose gone bloodshot. James Finney looked like any of the smiling retired detectives who used to keep dropping by the squad room to see how things were going. His black suit coat showed dandruff, and his rumpled shirt and wrinkled khakis suggested little in the way of feminine influence. Finney appeared comfortable, his hands folded, thumbs rubbing each other slowly. Reading from a battered stenographer's pad in front of him, Flores asked Finney to repeat the details of the murder.

"The woman was, of course, a prostitute," Finney began. In spite of the thick odor of hot grease from the kitchen warming up for the luncheon rush, Flores could smell mouthwash. "She was working on Los Angeles Street when the killer drove up. She asked him if he wanted a date and he said yes. They agreed upon a price, one hundred dollars. You know the routine. But instead of going to the hotel she used, he drove her to 422 Patterson Street, a house. Smart girls don't allow their clients to take them to strange places, but she was an addict and getting sick." Finney had knowledge of the Skid Row scene, but he did not affect the heavy street jargon of cops, snitches, and social workers. "She followed the killer to the basement where there was a mattress."

"Was this his house?" Flores asked.

"I don't know. I don't think he lived there."

“OK, go on.”

“When they undressed, she laughed at him, at his body. He lost control. That’s when he strangled her with his hands. He didn’t intend to kill her, he just lost control. When she was dead, he mutilated her body and cut off the tattoo. A rose.”

Flores looked down at his old scribbles, abbreviations and shorthand that held so much meaning. V for victim. LV for lividity. RG for rigor. LG for ligature.

“Did he do anything else?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened then?” Flores asked.

“He put her in a garbage sack and put her in the trunk of his car. He dumped her someplace else.”

“What about her clothes?”

“I don’t know.”

“And the knife?”

“The killer hid the evidence you found in the other man’s car.”

“Why did he do it?”

“Why do any of them do it? Sick. Twisted. Who knows? Offhand I would say he hated women. Maybe he enjoyed seeing the other man convicted of his crime.”

Flores had only to consult the pages of the steno pad once or twice as the story came out. He had never found the location of the murder, but they had recovered a weapon in Millston’s car along with panties and a bra, and the victim’s blood on all of them. Saxton’s

body bore stab wounds and a patch of skin had been cut away, so the tattoo was not immediately missed. That there had been a tattoo at all was revealed by a former pimp – he had called from jail, so had never been a suspect – but Flores had never entered that detail in the file. Roberto the pimp died in prison at the end of a sharpened toothbrush, and he never knew the rose was missing. Any number of Saxton’s clients might know of the rose, but the only people who knew about the mutilation were Flores, the killer, and now, Finney.

“Why are you doing this?” Flores asked. Finney looked surprised.

“It is *wrong* to execute an innocent man.”

“He’s been convicted in a court of law, by a jury, based upon the evidence,” Flores said. “He did it. He’s dropped all his appeals, and he’s accepted his sentence.” Flores was as much trying to rationalize his own work on the case as he was drawing the man out. No one in the criminal justice system relished a miscarriage of justice, so when suggestions of a wrongful conviction arose, the participants rationalized their mistakes with the evidence.

“As I recall,” Finney countered, “he hasn’t admitted his guilt. He’s letting the State kill him, but he never said that he did it.” Finney had no trouble looking Flores in the eye and his demeanor was one of qualified submission like the suspect innocent of murder but guilty of a string of burglaries.

Most murderers confessed, eventually, but Millston never had. He had lied about meeting Saxton, though, which helped. The case generated little attention until he abandoned all of his appeals, preferring a speedy euthanasia to ten or twenty years on death row. Millston’s record as an habitual sex offender provided one more example of the need for the

death penalty, and even the opponents of capital punishment stayed away from the case.

Saxton left no grieving relatives and neither would Millston.

“But you won’t tell me who the killer is,” Flores prodded.

“I cannot,” Finney replied.

“Why?”

“I cannot.”

“How can I find out who he is?”

“You’re the detective. You have to find that out.”

Flores considered that Finney himself might be the killer. Multiple personality? The good personality snitches on the bad personality. Flores forced away all the medical and legal complications of that possibility and acted to keep the conversation moving.

“Why did the killer tell you?”

“I have something he needs.”

“And what would that be?”

“Absolution.”

Flores had to absorb the information a moment. “You’re a priest?”

“Yes.”

“You were told this information in the confessional?”

“I received it in the context of a privileged communication.”

“But not the confessional?”

“It doesn’t make any difference. I cannot tell you who told me and I don’t have to tell you.”

“What is your parish?”

“I am Assistant Director at the Diocesan Mission.”

“The man who told you is a homeless man?”

“I won’t say.”

Flores knew that when dealing with an attorney or a priest, the police could not intrude on the confidentiality of that relationship. Supposedly, that extended to spouses, but many more wives informed on their husbands than attorneys gave up clients. Flores had never before encountered the clergy issue, but he knew that the privilege remained fundamental in the law.

“If you received this in confidence, in the confessional, how can you tell me?”

“I didn’t say it was in the confessional. But it was given to me as part of my function as a priest. I cannot tell you who told me, but I can tell you that a crime is about to be committed. That part I can reveal.”

“So, you won’t grant him absolution?”

“The penitent has to be sorry for his sins. If he allows this other crime to occur, that would be a barrier to his absolution. I cannot grant absolution as long as he allows another man to die for his crime.”

“Can he go to another priest and confess and receive absolution?”

“I cannot speak for another priest. I can only speak for my own conscience.”

“Did he seem sorry for the crime he had committed?”

“It would be inappropriate for me to answer that.”

Flores stared at the man and tried to think. This might as well be an anonymous tip; the caller gives information and hangs up. But his information was good, very good. Flores *had* to go to the LAPD, but that would mean opening an old wound.

On his way back to Hilltop, the pictures spun through Flores’s mind like flashes in a carousel mirror, swinging back and forth: Construction workers watching from outside the yellow tape, fascinated by the police activity and happy to be paid for standing around. The nude, emaciated body easily fitting sideways in the foot-wide trench. Her face had caught the wall of the excavation so that when she landed at the bottom she looked back over her left shoulder as if to see who noticed her. Only the mascara gives a clue as to gender.

Dry technical language droned in the background, providing contrast to the jarring images.

Cause of death: suffocation

Manner of death: strangulation by pressure to the neck. Victim was apparently strangled by hand, from in front, as evidenced by hemorrhages. The absence of skin under the fingernails and the absence of other evidence of struggle suggest that the killer was able to constrict the carotid arteries, producing unconsciousness within seconds.

Time of death: Not more than twelve hours before discovery, putting the time of death at between 8 PM and midnight, May 4, 1994.

Other injuries: Multiple lacerations inflicted postmortem by a sharp bladed instrument, possibly a knife. Both nipples cut away and a portion of skin from on top of the left breast cut away. These parts of the victim's body have not been accounted for by the Office of the Coroner.

No pithy comments by an eccentric deputy coroner to entertain prime time viewers, just flat prose to describe a dead human being.

Hiss and gargle from radios. Police cars blocking the street. Brown dirt and the smell of fresh lumber. White Coroner's van.

Arthur Millston in the interview room: Medium height, wiry, nervous, evasive. Never heard of her. Don't know her. OK, maybe I do know who she is. No, I never paid her for sex. I never had sex with her. She wouldn't go with me. Yes, I've paid other whores for sex. No that knife isn't mine. I don't know where it came from. I don't know anything about the panties. Yes, I've been convicted of rape. Did time at Chino. Yes, well, there was that thing with the little girl. She was lying, I never did that to her. I never hurt anybody.

The message from dispatch said call home immediately. Vicky, pale, begging forgiveness in the emergency room. She'll be fine the doctor said. It was definitely a suicide attempt. I don't recommend leaving her alone.

The Deputy DA in his uncommonly neat office: Good case, Ralph. No slam dunk, but a good case. The DA wants Special Circumstance on this one. Bad luck for Millston, killing

a hooker during a campaign. What are you going to do when you retire, Ralph? That sounds great. Hope it works out for you, Ralph.

The call from the pimp, collect from the county jail: Nice girl. Too bad. Not too smart, you know, but a nice girl. You know what I remember most about her? That tattoo on her tit. It was an expensive one too. She just got it.

Flores returned to the gaily painted cinder block building he had transformed from a print shop and parked in the small lot out front. The images and memories so cluttered his mind, he neglected to watch for other preschools as had become his custom. He regarded other children's centers not as competition, but as sources for inspiration and cooperation. Although preschools were largely a cottage industry, Flores knew there was strength in numbers. Early Childhood Education would eventually get more of the public monies now going for speedboats and blimps to catch drug runners.

III

“Bob, it's Ralph Flores calling!”

“Ralph! How's the babysitting business?”

“Early childhood education, Bob.” Flores corrected. “It's a school. I'm a teacher.

Doing good. How are you?”

“Not too bad. Getting a little short myself,” the detective answered. When cops get close to retirement, the subject comes up about every other sentence.

“How soon?”

“Ten months. But who's counting?”

“Yeah, I can see you don't think about it too much.”

“Not at all.”

“What're your plans?”

“New Mexico. Sarah can do her scripts there and she can come back here when she needs to.” Though anxious to get to the point, Flores felt it necessary to first engage his old colleague.

“She still doing cartoon shows?”

“Yup. No fame and glory, but it pays bills. I’m just going to wait and see what happens. I’ll need at least a year getting used to decent air.”

“Are you sure you can handle it?”

“I’m willing to try. And how’s your wife?”

“Vicky’s a hundred percent better, now that I’m away from homicide.” Flores slipped her name into the conversation just in case Hansen had forgotten it, not wishing to embarrass either of them. “Listen, Bob, I need your help.”

“What’s up?”

“You remember Arthur Millston?”

“If I didn’t, I read about him. He’s in the paper every day. That was your case. Wasn’t I on vacation?”

“I think you were,” Flores said. “Anyway, I’ve been approached with some new information about him, and I need to talk to someone about it.”

“Approached?” Flores heard Hansen’s caution lights click on. Ex cops are forever reaching out to old friends for favors frowned upon by law and regulation.

“A priest saw my name in the paper and called me. He had details we never published and he told me something that I didn’t find out until after the arrest.” Flores paused. “Bob, Millston might not have done it.”

“Well, for not having done it, he’s sure acting like he wants to take all the credit. He *wants* to be executed.”

“I know, but he was always a brick short in my estimation.”

“Why did this priest call you? Why didn’t he call here?”

“He did. He got Sanchez.”

“Say no more,” Hansen remarked. “I think you’re going to have to talk to the lieutenant, though.”

“Where’s Foltz?” Flores asked. “The girl who answered said he was on leave.”

“Um, rehab actually.”

“That bad?” Flores recalled the charming but erratic head of Homicide.

“Ohhhh, yeah. Found him in the parking lot here, drunk behind the wheel. He’s lucky he didn’t get stopped on the street. We’re not sure he’ll be back.”

“Who is acting?”

“You remember Anne Metcalfe, the Great White Hope?”

“No.”

“A climber.”

“Great White Hope?”

Hansen laughed and then dropped his voice. “Blonde, could have been a movie star. *Should* have been a movie star. Great White Hope is what the guys in patrol called her. Then when they found out how good a cop she was, she became the Yellow Peril. She’s the Great White Hope again. We’re all looking forward to her next assignment.”

“How’d she get into homicide?”

“How did she get anywhere? She’s married to a commander downtown, so she’s connected. It’s only temporary. You have talk to her, Ralph.”

“Maybe you can help me on this Bob?” Flores asked. “I think this is important. I wouldn’t bug you if it wasn’t”

“I know Ralph, but Metcalfe is what you might call a hands-on manager. She made that real clear. Besides, I’m getting ready for a trial on Monday and I’m swamped.”

“Who else is in the unit now?”

“Sanchez, of course. Our esteemed union rep.”

“Of course.”

“Did you know Betty Collins?”

“No.”

“Will Lansing?”

“Black guy? Property crimes?”

“Yeah.” Hansen paused. “Geez, I don’t know if there’s anyone else you’d know.”

“Can you set it up for me right away?”

“Can you come down now?”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Flores hung up and told a surprised Vicky he had to go out again. He headed downtown on First Street, over the freeways that had obliterated the once-Jewish neighborhood of Boyle Heights. Entering the downtown area on the porticoed bridge across the river and over the marshaling yards, he momentarily forgot the route that allowed him to use one of the free parking places in front of Central Division and settled for a meter on the

street. Flores walked past young, impeccably-uniformed officers whom he did not recognize into the modern brick building that had been his professional home for seventeen years.

“He’s some kind of nut!”

Lieutenant Anne Metcalfe sat back away from the absent lieutenant’s desk as if its clutter might stain her well-filled yellow blouse. Anne Metcalfe could indeed have been in movies, Flores thought. Bob Hansen sat to one side, silent.

“I’ve read about Millston,” she said. “He’s guilty as sin. I bet this is some kind of hoax.” She glanced cautiously from Flores to Hansen and back again. “What can you tell me about the case?”

Flores took a deep breath. “Construction workers found the body, strangled and cut. She’d been handled for prostitution, so her prints were on file. Then Vice notified us about Arthur Millston. They picked him up that night for propositioning a decoy officer. They booked him on a parole hold and impounded his car. During the inventory, they found bloody panties and a bloody knife. The knife was an expensive model, with a nice blade and a cherry handle. It was probably the nicest thing Millston owned. At first, he denied knowing anything about the case. Then he admitted knowing the victim, but denied talking to her that night and he denied killing her.”

“What did he have to say about the knife and the panties?” Metcalfe asked.

“He didn’t have a clue,” Flores said. “He said some hitchhiker must’ve dropped them. The lab dusted the car and found her prints on the passenger door. The DA took the case anyway based on the physical evidence and his prior record. His public defender said the

evidence was planted. Then Millston started saying that it was all a conspiracy and that Sallie Saxton planned to blow the whistle on police corruption on Skid Row. He said that's why she was killed. The Public Defender sent their investigator out, and she found out that Millston tended to rough the girls up. The word on the street was that even with cash, he had a hard time finding a date. Millston never testified, though, on advice of counsel. I was off the job by the time of the trial."

"When did you retire?" Metcalfe asked.

"August '94, right after we filed the case."

"You testified, didn't you Ralph?" Hansen broke in.

"I testified about his statements and the crime scene." Flores turned back to Metcalfe. "I think someone should look into it. The information that Father Finney has is too good. He works at the mission on Skid Row where the victim was picked up and probably murdered. Somebody knows something and told him in confession, or at least told him as a priest. Finney can't tell us who told him. He probably wasn't even supposed to tell me what he did. I don't think you should ignore it."

"What exactly is this special information?"

"The victim had a rose tattooed on her left breast," Flores said, working to keep his own eyes on Metcalfe's face. "It had been cut away so no one knew it was there, because it was missing."

"Why are you the only one who knows? Isn't it in the case file?"

"Well, no." Flores said. "An old pimp called me after the arrest. He was in jail and had a pretty good alibi."

“And it isn’t in the file?” Flores noted another supervisor primarily interested in neat paperwork.

“Just one of those details that never made it in.”

“Is there any independent confirmation on this?”

“Maybe some old arrest cards, but the pimp who told me about the rose said she only had it a few weeks, so maybe not. Her customers, maybe.”

“Not much chance of finding any of them.”

“But it makes sense to me,” Flores asserted. “Why else would that patch of skin be cut off?”

Flores watched Metcalfe consider all this. Flores knew he was open to criticism and Metcalfe was the kind of supervisor who would make certain none of it splashed on her.

“No, we won’t ignore it,” Metcalfe said. “We appreciate you bringing this to our attention, Ralph. I’ll assign...Sanchez. She’s good.” Flores looked down into his notebook and closed his eyes slowly while she picked up the phone and punched the keys with a pencil. There was no way she could handle a pistol with those nails, he thought. “Bertie, it’s Annie. Can you come in and see me?” As Metcalfe replaced the receiver, Flores realized that she had only left a message. Detective Sanchez was unable to come to the phone right now and she would get back to her as soon as possible. “She’ll call back.”

If Sanchez caught the case to look into this information, Flores needed to stay close.

“Maybe I should give Bertie a hand?” Flores suggested.

“Can’t do it,” Metcalfe said shaking her head. “You’re retired, a civilian. You have no official status.”

Hansen broke in. "Lieutenant, he could work with us as a civilian volunteer. Like a translator. He'll be supervised by a detective, not that he needs any supervision. It's covered in the manual."

"But the liability," Metcalfe said.

"We have liability any time a citizen or an informant helps us," Hansen answered. "It's even covered by law. You can do it. It's an extra pair of hands and a cost-effective use of your resources." Hansen knew all the buzzwords. "Ralph's well thought of, and we're spread pretty thin right now with Captain Foltz out and this trial coming up. Ralph would be better than some snitch. They remember him downtown. Besides, he knows the Chief."

"We were partners in patrol," Flores said, "that's all. I haven't spoken to him in years."

"He's godfather to your son."

"A long time ago, Bob."

"It might work," Metcalfe finally agreed, ever attentive to any political breeze.

"Shouldn't you notify the DA or the AG?" Flores asked. "The execution is next week."

"And tell them what?" Metcalfe replied. "Some rummy priest gave up a killer he won't identify? Even if you tell them, they won't stop it. They don't have to and they don't want to. But what *will* happen is that the anti-death penalty types will launch a Save-the-Baby-Raper campaign based on the malicious incompetence of the LAPD. The pro-Baby Rapers will hate us. The anti-Baby Rapers will hate us. And those undecided will hate us because everybody hates LAPD. Let's see what Bertie can find out."

Ralph Flores did not care for flip references to baby raping, but Metcalfe had made her point. Although Anne Metcalfe never made a real case on her own, and she never committed a sound decision on purpose, she excelled as a student of politics, a trait that destined her for command rank or, at the very least, a cushy staff job.

“A couple of months ago,” she continued, “we’d have time to sort this out. Next week, after the execution, nobody will care. But with a week to go, we either have to bust our butts to clear the name of some scum or try cover it up.”

Flores knew that there was no such thing as a secret, not in the CID and certainly not in the LAPD.

“I think,” Flores answered, “we...you need to tell them what you’re going to do.”

“I’ll have to think about that.”

Flores assumed that translated to “I need to talk to my husband.”

“What do you think we should do?” Flores saw that Metcalfe knew to borrow ideas freely.

“I’d say the first step is follow up on what we know. We knew she was killed someplace other than where her body was found, and this is the first hint of location. Let’s see what’s there. We might find something.”

“Good.”

“I don’t know if we can find anyone down there who is still around. We talked to some of the other girls on the stroll, but no one saw anything.”

Metcalf beamed. "Vice tried to use me as a decoy once, but they told me I was too good looking and I'd be made for a cop." Flores suspected that she mentioned this often and he let the little story go.

"Do you mind if I start some checking through the computer until Bertie gets back?" He asked.

"Not at all. But make sure you give everything to Bertie. This information is police department property. Everything has to go through Bertie. I'll set you up with a clerk."

Flores followed Metcalfe to the desk of a young woman with corn rows, typing at a terminal. The lieutenant introduced her as Kadisha and explained to her that Flores was a former officer helping out on an old case. She should give all printouts to Detective Sanchez.

"No problem" was the young woman's only response. Metcalfe vanished, undoubtedly to make a phone call, and Flores pulled up a chair. Although Kadisha's perfume was a bit too strong, she took care in her appearance, unlike many admin employees in the department. She kept her manicured nails short preferring efficiency at the keyboard to style, but her skirt and matching jacket rivaled that of the urban professionals whose children Flores helped educate.

Flores started by asking her to run 422 Patterson Street. She typed and paused, staring at the screen.

"No record," she replied.

Flores pursed his lips.

"How about the 400 block?" he said.

"No problem."

Flores hated that response, which had come to replace, I'd be happy to, your welcome, don't mention it, and a whole list of other once-common and more sincere courtesies.

"Nothing in the last three years," she said.

"You mean there could be more? I'm interested in five years ago or more."

"No problem." Tap tap tap tap, pause. "Have to force."

"What?"

"There are too many entries. When that happens, you use a force code to get them all."

Flores took her word for it.

"Anything for 422?"

"No. Here's 405 and 409 and 415. These are booking numbers."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning people were either arrested at these addresses or they gave them as residences at the time of booking."

"How many?"

She squinted at the screen, "Uh, fifteen."

"Dates?"

"'89 to '94."

"How about 1994? April, March, May."

"OK." Tap, tap, tap, tap.

"Can you print it out?"

“No problem.” She hit a key and a printer several feet away screeched in protest.

“Hello, Ralph.” Flores looked up at the impassive face of Detective Bertha Sanchez.

“How’s retirement? I hear you’re babysitting,”

“Hello, Bertie.” Flores stood and put out his hand which she shook lightly. “It’s a pre-school. Doing good.”

“No Blue Heaven in Idaho for you?”

“No, and no Oregon or Nevada or Colorado. Just a home boy.”

“That’s great.” Still no smile, which Flores expected. Since their last meeting, nothing had transpired to change their relationship.

Sanchez wore her hair shorter than before, but her face still pinched the same, as if she were angry that she could not understand the question or the answer. Her bust and butt had grown too, but Ralph Flores could not comment about the latter. His own waistline had grown in the intervening years. She still dressed in businesslike pants suits. Today’s color was brown.

Sanchez had earned the nickname “Boom-Boom” while on patrol after she emptied an entire magazine into a lunch wagon she insisted concealed a Crips assassination squad. Amazingly, the hit team escaped without leaving a single drop of blood.

“So, what have you got, Ralph?” she asked. He explained to her what the priest had told him and its significance. Flores watched her brow grow new furrows, as if the information piled up over her eyes. When he finished, she nodded and said, “Thanks Ralph, I’ll take it from here.”

Flores was ready. “Anne thinks we should work together. I have the background for the case, and she’s shorthanded.” Flores risked using the lieutenant’s given name to suggest some influence there. Sanchez’s expression did not change. “Look Bertie, I’ll just be helping you. Your name will be on all the paperwork. You’re in charge.”

“You’ve been checking the computer?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah, I figured we should find out as much as we can about the address. Nothing on the address, but the street is wrong. Or at least it used to be.”

Sanchez looked at the printout, appearing to understand. She spoke to Kadisha in computerese, using acronyms that suggested she really knew what the printouts meant. Then she looked up at the large wall map of the Central Division. “Patterson, between Fourth and Fifth. I can’t picture it.”

Sanchez was by no means simple. At the academy, she easily memorized whole sections of the penal code and the regulations. In the field, she “gave good paper,” to the comfort of supervisors, and she rarely complained. But Bertie could never be called a hot dog, although her courage did measure up when necessary. A timely and skillful baton blow to a gun hand once saved a partner’s life. On another occasion a knife wound kept her off the job for three months.

“I can’t place it either,” Flores said. “Listen, I’ve got to get back to the school. I’ve got an inspector stopping by this afternoon. Can you see what you can find out about these arrests? You’ll probably want to meet the priest.”

“Right, I want to interview him myself. Where is he?”

“He works at the Diocesan Mission on Crocker.”

“OK, I’ll talk to him after I get this started.”

“Maybe I can go along,” he said. “Annie wants us to work together. Talk to Annie. It’ll go faster Bertie, you won’t have to spend all that time reading the case.”

“You’ve got a point. I’ll talk to her.”

“Can you pick me up at school at 3:30? We can take a look at that house together.”

Sanchez agreed and Flores gave her the address of Hilltop.

On his way out to his car, Flores noticed the familiar and the different at Central Division. More computers, different faces. New crime watch and D.A.R.E. posters flanked the old sign “All persons entering this facility subject to search.” The same glass walls and stacks of paper, and the same looks of helplessness and tragedy in the windowless lobby where crime victims and crime relatives waited to argue with bureaucrats behind bulletproof glass. A police station waiting room – even one in California and one that won an architecture prize – hears little laughter.