

LOSER'S TOWN

A
DAVID
SPANDAU
Novel

DANIEL DEPP





As the van turned off Laurel Canyon and up onto Wonderland, Potts said to Squiers, 'How many dead bodies have you seen?'

Squiers thought for a minute, his face squinted as if thought were painful to him. Potts figured it probably was. Finally Squiers said, 'You mean, like, in a funeral home or just laying around?'

This sort of thing never failed to drive Potts crazy. You ask him a simple question and he takes three fucking days and then gives you a stupid answer. This is why he hated working with him.

'Jesus, yeah, okay, just fucking laying around. Not your fucking grannie in her coffin.'

This sent Squiers into another round of thought and facial manipulation. I could go out for a freaking cup of coffee while he's thinking, Potts said to himself. Potts wanted to hit him with something. Instead he bit his

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lip and turned his head to watch the houses they passed.

The elderly van trudged up the steep, winding street that seemed to go on forever. Squiers drove, as always, because Squiers liked driving and Potts didn't. In Potts' opinion, you had to be an idiot or a maniac to enjoy driving in Los Angeles. Squiers qualified as both. Potts read somewhere that there were more than ten million people in LA, people who spent literally half their lives on the roads. In some places twelve lanes of traffic going eighty miles an hour, bumper to bumper, within inches of each other. Careening along in several tons of glass and metal, your knuckles white on the wheel. You go too slow they run over your ass. You go too fast you can't stop in time when some old fart brakes at a senile hallucination, standing a lane of a hundred cars on its nose. You got no choice but to do whatever everybody else is doing, no matter how stupid. Mainly you just do it and try not to think about the mathematical impossibility of it all; the sheer, mindless optimism that any of this could function for longer than fifteen seconds without getting you killed or mangled. On the other hand, every fifteen seconds somebody actually *was* getting killed or mangled on an LA freeway, so it was perfectly sane to stress about it. You had to have a fucking death wish to drive in LA.

What Potts hated mainly, though, was that you were forced to pretend people knew what they were doing when they clearly didn't. You look out the window at the faces

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hurtling past and they give you no reason for hope. Whizzing past goes a collection of drunks, hormonal teenagers, housewives fighting with their kids, hypertense execs screaming into cellphones, the ancient, the half-blind, the losers with no reason to keep living, the sleep-deprived but amphetamine-amped truck drivers swinging a gazillion-tonned rig of toilet supplies. Faces out of some goddamned horror movie. One false move and everybody dies. You had to lie to yourself in order to function. This is what got to Potts. Potts was no optimist. You spend five years in a Texas prison and it changes your view of what people are like. Jesus, so many fucking psychos loose in the world it's a wonder we manage to wake in our beds alive, much less navigate a fucking superhighway. Then you were forced to shove all this aside, cram it into some little cupboard in your brain and shut it away, whenever you walked out the fucking door in the morning. You had to make yourself forget everything you knew about life, everything you knew to be true, and pretend that people were somehow Good and not the collection of thieves and madmen and basic shits you knew them to be. This is what drove Potts crazy. It was exhausting, this burden of self-deception. The goddamn weight of it made him tired all the time.

Potts looked over at Squiers, who stared straight ahead over the wheel, brow creased, mimicking the act of human thought. Squiers was huge, pale and dumb, Potts' exact opposite, and Potts almost admired him. Potts hated being

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around him, of course, and felt the world would clearly be a much safer place if Squiers happened to get run over by a train. Squiers was slow and plodding and whatever happened in his head bore no resemblance to what happened in Potts'. Squiers never worried, never got nervous or frightened, could fall asleep standing up like a goddamn Holstein. Never questioned anything, never contributed an answer, never argued. He'd either do something or he wouldn't, and you could never be sure which way it would go, since there appeared to be no thought process behind it. Squiers was maybe the happiest person Potts had ever met. There were no conflicts in his life. You give Squiers a nice blood-soaked chainsaw movie or a pile of cheap porno mags and Squiers was as content as a child. Meanwhile Potts had a bad stomach and couldn't remember a time when the sky wasn't fixing to collapse on him. Potts had to envy him a little, while still hating his psychotic guts. Richie called them Mutt and Jeff, made jokes about their each being one half of the perfect employee, though utter fuck-ups individually. Potts didn't like Richie very much either, though Richie paid well and ex-cons couldn't be too choosy.

The van climbed up and up, out of this world and into the next, past fancy-ass places costing millions of bucks but still had their asses on stilts hanging a hundred feet over a goddamn canyon. For that kind of money you'd think you could get a backyard. Potts couldn't imagine life without a backyard, you had to have a backyard.

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Someplace you could go out and drink a beer and barbecue a goddamn hamburger. Even the little shitpile he rented out in Redlands had a fucking backyard. The truth was, though, the whole Hollywood Hills scene was bullshit. For a couple of million bucks you got a dinky house with no yard at all and its ass hanging over a goddamn abyss. Well yeah, that was fucking Hollywood all over, wasn't it? The whole goddamn place was a con. Movie stars my ass. A bunch of suckers. Give me a house with a backyard anytime.

'A hundred and twenty-three,' said Squiers.

Potts looked at him. 'What?'

'Dead bodies I seen.'

'You lying sack of shit. A hundred and twenty-three? What kind of number is that? You a fucking guard at Auschwitz or something? Jesus.'

'No, no kidding. I saw a plane crash once. A hundred and fucking twenty-three people perished.'

Squiers saying that word, perished, really irritated the hell out of Potts. He was lying, he'd heard it somewhere on the news, and the newscaster had said perished. Squiers didn't even know what it meant, where the hell would he get off using a word like that. Potts decided to nail him on it.

'You saw a plane crash.'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'You actually saw it crash.'

'No, I didn't actually see it, like, hit the ground. But I

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come along right after it did, when all the fire trucks were there and shit.'

'And you saw the bodies?'

'What?'

'You saw the bodies, right? A hundred and twenty-three fucking bodies, thrown all over the ground. And you counted them, right? One, two, three, a hundred and twenty-three?'

'Well, no, shit, I didn't actually see the bodies, but they were there. A hundred and twenty-three people on that plane and they all perished.'

Potts took a deep breath and sighed. 'What did I ask you?'

'When?'

'When I asked you how many bodies you've seen. I said seen. That's the word I used. I didn't say how many bodies have you heard about, how many the fucking bozo on the news said there were. Are you grasping this?'

'They were there, man. I didn't have to see them. It was a fucking planeload of people.'

'But the point is, you didn't actually see them, did you? You heard about them, but you didn't actually see them with your own little eyes. Am I correct?'

'Yeah but—'

'No, no fucking but. Did you actually, personally, with your own eyes, see a hundred and twenty-three bodies? Just yes or no. Yes or no?'

Squiers steamed for a minute, he wriggled his ass a little in the driver's seat, then he said curtly: 'No.'

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'A ha!' said Potts. 'I rest my case.'

The van climbed slowly up the steep winding road. It was three o'clock in the morning and a goddamn fog coming in didn't help matters. They had to stop several times to check the streets. It was like a rat maze up here. It seemed to Potts that the climb was endless. He didn't like heights. He liked nice flat ground, that's why he lived in the desert.

'This is it,' Potts said.

They stopped at a large metal gate. Squiers edged the van up next to the keypad. Squiers looked at Potts, who was shuffling around the various pockets of the combat gear he liked to wear.

'You got the code?'

'Yeah, of course I've got the code.' Truth was, Richie had written the code on a little Post-it note and given it to him and now Potts couldn't find it. He'd taken it from Richie back at the club and hadn't thought about it and now he couldn't find the goddamn thing. He fought back a rising panic attack. Squiers, the bastard, was watching him with a barely hidden smirk on his face. He was hoping Potts couldn't find it, so they'd have to call Richie and Richie would rip Potts a new asshole. Squiers was pissed about the airplane thing and was too dumb to figure out how to get revenge on his own.

At last Potts found the Post-it note, stuck in one of the chest pockets on his camouflage jacket. He felt his bowels relax and Squiers looked disappointed. Potts tried to look

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cool, as if it hadn't been any sweat, and read the code to Squiers, who reached through the window and punched it in. The gate shuddered a little then opened and they drove through.

The house was perched on a knoll right up at the very end of Wonderland Avenue. As the gate shut behind them, they climbed up the narrow drive to a level paved area where the garage was. There was a sharp right and the drive continued up at a steep angle to the house itself. Squiers parked the van in front of the garage. They got out and stared at the steep rise.

'Shit,' said Potts. 'How are the parking brakes on this fucker?'

'Hell, I dunno. It ain't my van.'

'We have to back it up and park the bastard there,' Potts said, motioning up the drive. 'And you better hope the sonofabitch don't roll downhill and go shooting off into outer space.'

'Shit,' said Squiers. He looked at the spot where they'd have to park, then followed the possible trajectory of the vehicle downhill and off the edge of the knoll and down onto a valley full of houses.

'Well, let's do it,' said Potts. 'Let's go have a look first.'

They trudged up the hill. Potts was small and wiry but he smoked. Squiers was a huge fucking buffoon. By the time they got to the top they were both out of breath. They sat for a moment, then Squiers tried the door. It was unlocked. He looked at Potts, waiting.

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They entered the darkened house, stepping into a living room with a cathedral ceiling, enclosed on two sides by floor-to-ceiling walls of glass. Beyond was a patio that wrapped around most of the house and a panorama of the lights of Los Angeles far below.

Squiers reached over to flip on a light but Potts stopped him.

'What the hell are you doing? It's like a goddamn fish-bowl in here. They could fucking see us from fucking Compton.'

Potts went over and pulled the heavy curtains closed. 'Now you can turn on the fucking light.'

They looked around the room.

'It's a fucking dump,' declared Potts. 'The fucker's got about a billion fucking dollars and not a lick of taste. Not a goddamn thing worth stealing.'

'Richie'd get pissed if we stole anything,' said Squiers. 'He said not to touch anything.'

'Fuck Richie,' said Potts. 'Anyway, there's nothing to steal. Look at this shit. Jesus.'

Potts started opening doors. 'Where the hell he say it was?'

'Upstairs, I think.'

They trudged up the steps. Potts opened a door. An office. He opened another one. A large messy bedroom. He pushed open another one.

The girl sat slumped on the toilet. She looked maybe sixteen or seventeen, very pretty, with long brown hair and

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a good figure. She was wearing a short, plaid skirt and a pair of colored tights were down around her ankles. A needle and a syringe stuck out of her left thigh, and the works for cooking up heroin sat on the sink next to her.

Potts and Squiers stared at her for a while.

‘She’s cute,’ Squiers said after a while. ‘You sure she’s dead?’

‘She fucking better be,’ said Potts.

‘Cute tits.’

‘You’re a fucking pervert,’ said Potts distastefully, ‘you know that?’

‘All I’m saying is that I’d fuck her. If she was alive.’

Potts made a disgusted face. ‘Where’s the fucking camera?’

Squiers dug out a small, cheap 35mm tourist’s camera.

‘How come he didn’t give us a digital?’ asked Squiers, examining the camera. ‘This is shit.’

‘Because he wants the fucking film, that’s why.’

‘Yeah, but why’s it got to be film?’

‘Because he doesn’t fucking trust us, okay? We could make copies before we got back. He wants the fucking roll of film.’

‘Oh.’

‘Can I have the fucking camera now, please?’

Potts took pictures of the girl from all angles, pausing only to let the flash recharge.

‘Okay, go and get the van,’ he told Squiers, ‘and back it up as close as you can. I don’t want to have to drag this bitch all the way down the hill.’

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'How come you don't go and get the van?'

'Mainly because you're a fucking sick motherfucker and there's no way in hell I'm going to leave you alone with this bitch. Does that answer your fucking question?'

Squiers looked at him. He didn't move. For a moment Potts thought he was going to turn on him. But you could never tell what Squiers was thinking, if what he did could be called thinking. There was always just that sort of glassy look, as if he'd managed to focus through your eyes and onto the back of your head. Potts waited for a move, the flicker of a muscle before he struck, because you'd never see it in his eyes first. Squiers might be a fucking moron but you couldn't read him and you couldn't assume he'd even do what was in his own interest.

Finally Squiers just shrugged and turned and went downstairs. Potts took a deep breath and went into the bedroom to take a few shots. Richie wanted what he called 'establishing shots', photos that clearly identified the place. Richie thought of everything. Potts didn't like the miserable goombah shit anymore than he liked Squiers, but you had to hand it to him, he didn't miss a trick.

Squiers meanwhile was having a hell of a time getting the van backed up the hill. He'd borrowed the van from his brother-in-law, who'd told him it was reliable. Squiers imagined the weaselly little sonofabitch laughing at him and made up his mind to beat the shit out of him when he got back, sister or no sister. The gears were shit, first wasn't enough and second was too much. After a lot of

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grinding and rocking, Squiers finally just pulled all the way up to the garage, then backed up quick enough so that the bumper scraped the pavement before it rose up the hill. When he got to the top, Squiers left the van in first and locked the emergency brake. It lurched a few inches downhill but it caught. Squiers waited and the thing didn't go anywhere so he got out of the van and went back into the house.

'You think you made enough fucking noise?' Potts said to him when he walked in the door.

'I think we ought to hurry. I don't trust the brakes on that thing.'

'Shit.'

Potts went into the upstairs bedroom and pulled a duvet off the bed. He dragged it into the hallway outside the bathroom and spread it on the floor. Squiers started into the bathroom to pick the girl up but Potts pushed him aside. Squiers stood back and let Potts tend to her. Potts pulled out the syringe and laid it on the sink next to the works. He lifted her off the toilet and dragged her into the hallway and onto the blanket. The skirt had ridden up and she was naked underneath. Potts wrestled the pantyhose back up over her hips.

'Why bother to do that?' asked Squiers, who'd been watching all this appreciatively.

'I don't want anybody thinking we interfered with her.'

'What difference does it make?'

Potts didn't bother with a reply. It made Potts sick to

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think of somebody finding the body and believing it had been interfered with. It was just the sort of filthy thing that the newspapers and TV loved, and it made Potts sick to imagine that somebody might think it was him, even if they had no idea who he actually was. When he'd made the girl decent he rolled her up in the blanket, like a Tootsie Roll.

'What about the works?' Squiers asked him.

'Richie said leave it, it'll give this fucker something to remind him when he comes home.'

They held opposite ends of the rolled blanket and awkwardly carried the body down the stairs, out of the house and to the van. Squiers reached with one hand to open the back door of the van when the vehicle lurched forward half a foot. Then again.

Panicked, Squiers let go of his end of the blanket. The end with the girl's head struck the ground with a dull thud. Squiers was dancing alongside the van, struggling with the door, as it began rolling downhill. The van was picking up speed as Squiers jumped inside. He pushed the brake and nothing much happened. The garage was looming up fast. He stood up on the goddamn brake, trying to push it through the floor, pushing his back against the seat and pulling hard at the wheel with his hands. There was an ugly grinding noise and Squiers thought the brakes had given way completely but the van slowed with a sound like a freight train stopping and came to rest a couple of feet from the bumper of the Porsche sitting in the garage.

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Squiers slumped over the steering wheel. He got out and looked up the hill at Potts, who had sat down next to the girl, his mouth open.

Squiers came trudging up the hill. 'Fucking brakes, man,' he said happily, as if he'd just stepped off some ride at Magic Mountain.

There was nothing Potts could possibly say. They half-carried, half-dragged the girl down the hill and stuck her in the van. They were nearly to Ontario and Potts was still shaking inside and smoking another cigarette to calm himself down when Squiers said, out of the blue:

'At least her ass was clean.'