

WHITE SISTER



STEPHEN J.
CANNELL

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WHITE
SISTER

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ALSO BY STEPHEN J. CANNELL

Cold Hit

Vertical Coffin

Runaway Heart

Hollywood Tough

The Viking Funeral

The Tin Collectors

King Con

Riding the Snake

The Devil's Workshop

Final Victim

The Plan

Shane is lucky to have Alexa
But I'm blessed to have Marcia
This one's for you, babe

1

IT WAS EARLY evening on Thursday the first week of July and Alexa and I were walking through San Julian Park in Skid Row, on our way back from the LAPD Central Division Jail. Homeless men in tattered coats swung blood-shot eyes in our direction, tracking us like government radar. We were returning from a training day in jail transport procedures.

The retraining had been mandated after a Mara Salvatrucha gang-banger named Hector Morales got bludgeoned to death while shuffling on a drag line through the underground tunnel that connects the jail to the Fifth Street courthouse. A rival Hispanic gang-banger had done the work by somehow slipping out of his waist restraints and hitting Hector in the head with a cut-down chair leg from the jail cafeteria. He'd been hiding the weapon inside the leg of his orange jumpsuit.

The Professional Standards Bureau, our new, media-friendly name for the Internal Affairs Division, investigated. All supervisors and detectives above grade two were ordered to undergo a re-

fresher day on incarceration and transfer tactics. Alexa and I were dressed in grubbies—jeans and old sweatshirts—but before we were twenty feet into the park, everybody there had made us for cops anyway.

“Tony says this surgery is no sweat, but you can tell he’s scared,” Alexa was saying as we stepped carefully around some dog shit, a pile of trash, and a sleeping homeless couple. She was talking about the upcoming heart surgery our Chief of Police was scheduled to have tomorrow morning.

“Bypass surgery is getting to be pretty common,” I offered. “It’s natural to be scared, but he’ll be okay.”

Hollow words, considering Tony Filosiani was getting a complete coronary makeover. The surgeons were cutting his chest open, taking both mammary arteries, and grafting them around the four blocked arteries in his heart. Any way you looked at it, he was in for a tough ten days and wasn’t scheduled back on the job for a couple of months.

“Is it me, or does this park smell worse than ever?” Alexa said, changing the subject. “Like a big outdoor latrine.”

“July heat,” I answered. “It always smells worse in the summer.”

We walked past a line of portable toilets, which were called Al-ices by the people on the Row, because Alice Callahan of the Las Familias del Pueblo Community Center had badgered the city council until they finally funded their installation. In a vengeful act of municipal retaliation, the toilets were rarely cleaned out but nonetheless served both physical and commercial needs. A lot of drug and prostitution deals were consummated within the smelly three-foot confines of those portable johns.

“I’m gonna check my messages, see if I have a meeting that was supposed to be set up tonight,” Alexa said. “Then if there’s time, I’d like to run over to the hospital and see Tony on the way home.” She stepped over a well-known park character named Horizontal Joe. He was huddled under a blanket stenciled with a W—a sure sign it was stolen from the Weingart Center on South San Pedro Street.

“Watch where you’re goin’,” Joe growled, without bothering to look up.

Parker Center loomed before us like a drifting glass iceberg; a

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huge box of a building with absolutely no architectural significance. One of the strange anomalies of Los Angeles was that the Central Division Jail and the Police Administration Building were contiguous to the city's fifty-square-block section of blight known as Skid Row. Some Parker Center cops felt it was easier to take the seven-block walk if you were headed toward the lock-up, rather than move your car out of the Glass House garage and look for non-existent parking by the jail. As a result, the cops and homeless spent countless hours in mutual distrust as we shared the urine-soaked walkways and broken drinking fountains in San Julian Park.

Alexa and I stepped off the curb where an ageless man wearing tennis shoes with no laces and a greasy brown poncho was ranching quarters out of a parking meter, a practice known as spanging. He didn't even bother to stop. Most of these people had discovered by now that no cop worth his wage would waste two hours booking a guy at the jail over a twenty-five-cent misdemeanor.

"I hope Tony gets back on the job before two months," I groused. "I can't stand the thought of Great White Mike being in charge of the department." I had a recent and unrewarding history with Deputy Chief Michael Ramsey, who I viewed as little more than an ambitious power junkie in a braided hat.

"Mike's okay. Just a little jacked up," Alexa said, smiling slightly.

My wife is the head of the Detective Services Group. I'm a Detective III assigned to Homicide Special, so technically she's my boss. She's about to make captain and is three layers above me on the department flow chart. All of which means I get to put out the garbage on the job, as well as at home. Just kidding.

We finally left the squalor of Fifth Street, known as the Nickel, and headed toward the air-conditioned sanctuary of the Glass House. Brown burlap slowly gave way to starched blue as we entered the marble lobby. We got on the elevator, and since it was empty, I gave my beautiful wife a kiss. She has long black hair, high cheekbones, and is one of the most striking women I have ever come across. She could easily have made her living doing fashion shoots. I, on the other hand, look like I got emptied out of a vacuum cleaner. I'm five-eleven and a half, lean, and gristly. Topping this unholy collection of scars and medical mistakes is a hammered

flat nose and short black hair that never quite lies down. All of this makes me resemble a club fighter who's stayed in the ring too long. It's a miracle Alexa ever agreed to marry me. But then, if Julia Roberts could once marry Lyle Lovett, I guess anything is possible.

The door opened on four and two young patrolmen got on, so we cut the funny stuff and I said good-bye.

"See you at home in about an hour and a half," Alexa said as I got off on that random floor and pushed the Down button for the parking garage.

Five minutes later I was in my freshly leased, silver Acura MDX, enjoying the new car smell as I headed out of the administration-building parking garage on my way home. A bleak landscape of urban blight and human misery passed by outside, but I was oblivious with the windows up and the AC on. I was in my sweet-smelling automotive capsule, immune to the reek and cries of the Row, thinking about Tony Filosiani.

In the last decade or so, the LAPD had experienced a run of disasters, from the Rodney King case to the Rampart scandal. Recently, we had been cleaning up the mess, and that was mostly because of Tony. Our chief arrived from Brooklyn four years ago and was known by the troops as the Day-Glo Dago because of his colorful, somewhat out-there personality and management style. I was worried about him and would have liked to go over to USC Medical Center where he was being prepped for surgery to let him know he was in my thoughts. But I'm just a Detective III, and somewhere deep in the reptilian part of my brain that processes police protocol, it felt like an ass-kiss, so I didn't go. It was different for Alexa. She was a division commander.

I was in a silent argument with myself over this dilemma when I took my eyes off the road to reach in my glove box and turn on my police scanner, which is mandated off-duty protocol.

As I switched to Tac One, I heard a loud crash and a thump. I jerked my eyes up just in time to see a Safeway shopping cart full of junk skitter across the street in front of me, spilling empty Evian bottles and useless debris everywhere. I stood on the brake pedal as I heard screaming.

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I'd hit someone.

I piled out of the Acura and started to look for the pedestrian. Nothing in front. Nothing in back. Where the hell was he?

"Under here, you stupid muthafucka!" a man shrieked.

I kneeled down and looked. Wedged under my oil pan was one of the scrawniest, scruffiest men I have ever seen. Dusty black skin, dreadlocks, and a greasy, brown coat that looked like it had been used as the drop cloth under a lube rack.

"Look what you've done, you asshole!" the man screamed, holding his wrist. "Can't you watch where you're going?"

"You okay?" I stammered.

I reached under the car and tried to grab him by the shoulder to drag him out, but when I touched him, he started screaming louder.

"Whatta you want me to do?" I asked helplessly, wondering how to get him out from under there.

"Just get away from me, ya dumb muthafucka."

Then he slowly started to worm his way out from beneath my car. It was hard to guess his age under the tangled beard and layer of grime, but if I had to, I'd say around thirty-five. He had a cut on his head and scrapes all over the side of his face. His right wrist looked broken. How I had not killed him was a miracle.

Once he got out, he spent several moments moaning and cradling his wrist before he stumbled over, sat on the curb and glared malevolently. It took him about ten more seconds to figure me out. "Cop," he finally growled.

2

HIS NAME WAS Jonathan Bodine, and he was a sidewalk sleeper from Julian Street where the hard-core homeless lived in cardboard condos—old shipping crates covered with Saran wrap to keep the rain out. He smelled worse than a tuna boat, had tobacco-stained teeth and a colorful vocabulary.

“You just another drives-too-fast-don’t-give-a-shit-half-stepper,” he growled at me, cradling his broken right wrist with his left hand, glaring with enough hatred to start a race riot.

I felt guilty and offered up my excuse: “I didn’t see you.” The defense rests.

“Jus’ ’cause you a cop, don’t mean you can go an’ plow poor folks down.”

“You were jaywalking. You’re supposed to cross in the crosswalks. Section P-dash-one-oh-six of the motor vehicle code. Look it up.” The last thing I needed was a frivolous lawsuit from this guy.

“You just an A-train hard-ass out here gorillin’ and Godzillin’.

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But you ain't helpin' nobody. Hit my black ass and now *I'm* the damn problem?"

He tried to stand up, but he was half lit and fell to his right, instinctively putting his bad wrist down to break his fall. He shrieked when his hand touched the ground, falling awkwardly onto his shoulder. Again, I tried to help him, but he knocked me back with the sleeve of his good arm, then whined and moaned for about two more minutes.

"I'll take you to the hospital."

"They ain't gonna do nothin'. One look at me and I get the nigga chute."

"I'll pay for it. We'll get your wrist set. It looks broken."

"Damn right, it's broken." And now a crafty look crept up onto his face, filling his dark eyes like bilge water. "Think you can just plow folks down, then back over twice to finish the job. But this here kinda brutality got big economic consequences."

"I didn't back over you twice. And you were breaking the law. You can't cross in the middle of the block, buddy."

"Who cares what you say? You jus' talkin' shit an' swallowin' spit."

Quality discourse. Next, we had an extensive discussion over what to do with his Safeway cart.

"I leave it out here it gets jack-rolled by them Quality-of-Life criminals from the Nickel," he whined.

"I'm not putting all that junk in the back of my clean car," I defended.

He got to his feet without answering and started to wander across the street toward the shopping cart, which was tipped over at the far curb. A yellow cab with its roof light on was speeding down Sixth and didn't see him either. The cabbie hit the binders and went sideways in a desperate slide, accompanied by the squeal of tortured rubber.

"Watch where you're goin' you blind-ass-piece-a-shit!" Jonathan Bodine screamed drunkenly at the cabbie, who had missed him by scant inches before straightening up and powering on.

I crossed the street and reluctantly helped him load his grubby

possessions back into the shopping cart, thinking I was going to need a tetanus shot when this was over. We pushed the cart back across the street, and after another argument, which I lost, loaded it all into my car, filling my brand-new Acura SUV like a Skid Row dumpster.

"Stick the schooner in the back," Jonathan ordered.

"Unless your name is John *Safeway*, we're not stealing this shopping cart," I declared.

Five minutes later, with the Safeway cart wedged in behind the front seat, we took off toward the hospital. Along the way, I was forced to endure my first Jonathan Bodine hard-luck rant.

"You think it's tough on the Row, you should try it in the Bassaland. Your lily-white ass wouldn't last ten seconds in that African rainforest," he rambled.

I tried to tune him out by focusing on the steady stream of social mistakes bubbling from my police radio. But I couldn't do it. He was relentless.

"I hadda survive almost a year in that jungle. Couldn't a lasted 'cept I was wearin' the purple robes a the royal house, an' I got the Third Eye of tribal wisdom." He rattled like a tambourine, delusional, craziness spewing out of him. "I got people in my head talkin' to me—dead people from all the way back to the Black Holocaust. These half-steppers is all the time tellin' me how slaves from the Bassaland got exiled from the tribe and sold to do all kinda mystical work and what all. When I was growin' up in Cameroon, 'fore I got my commission in the Royal Navy, these voices was tellin' me desperate stories about how tribal brothers was being sold to slavers in the *Kon* where their souls got sucked out by the walking dead who live there. Walking dead make all these assholes on the Nickel look like prissy faggots with their twenty-eight-day shuffle hotels an' shopping cart elections for a dumb-ass seat on the neighborhood council. All a that ain't nothin' up against a rainforest where you got dead people suckin' out your soul an' shit."

I decided to take him to County-USC instead of the closer Queen of Angels Hospital. I made my decision mostly because

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Tony was at USC Medical Center. I glanced over at Bodine. He seemed totally unplugged from reality.

A few months ago, I'd read a flyer about the homeless passed out by Administrative Affairs. The one-sheet was supposed to better acclimate us so that we as law enforcement officers would understand the problems faced by our neighbors on the Row. It said that half the people there were alcoholics and one-third were mentally ill. The rest were just holding on to the bottom rung of society, hoping to survive one day at a time. I looked over at my passenger. Jonathan Bodine's eyes flashed in the dimly lit car possessed by ideas as he listened to voices only he could hear.

We pulled up to the emergency room entrance and I parked my car in a red zone, left the flashers on, and hung my cuffs over the steering wheel, a universal cop signal identifying a plain-clothes car. Then I led him inside.

ER admitting rooms in gang areas serviced by hospitals like County-USC are quickly becoming L.A.'s strange new nightmare. More and more, these facilities are degenerating into desperate war zones where rival bangers bring their wounded homies, frequently resuming hostilities in the pastel waiting rooms. MAC-10s would suddenly begin chattering, chewing up plaster divides and vinyl sofas. As a result, bulletproof glass and lead wall security were being installed on a priority basis.

With the help of my badge, Bodine was processed quickly. I really wanted to get him patched up and out of my life. I talked to Admitting and signed a payment voucher. After he was signed in, a pretty African-American nurse escorted the disheveled Mr. Bodine into one of the small observation cubicles. I could hear him complaining through the curtained wall, em-effing his way through a preliminary orthopedic exam.

I decided since I was here, what the hell, might as well go up and wish Tony luck. Maybe I'd run into Alexa. I needed advice about what to do with Bodine. I wasn't sure how far my responsibility to him extended. I had run him over. No argument there. But he *was* jaywalking. I didn't want to get wrapped up in a lawsuit, but I felt guilty. Mostly, I just wanted to mail the package to somebody else.

I hoped Alexa would advise me that after his wrist was set, my obligation to him was over.

When I arrived in the coronary care unit, the floor nurse informed me that they had just given Tony a sedative and he was already asleep. Surgery was scheduled for seven A.M. tomorrow.

"Did Lieutenant Scully show up, by any chance?" I asked.

The nurse checked her clipboard and shook her head.

"It would probably have been less than thirty minutes ago."

"Nobody by that name has been here."

I had a momentary inkling that something was wrong. I called Alexa's office and got her assistant Ellen.

"She left here almost an hour ago," Ellen said. "She was going to see Tony at the hospital. You could try there."

"That's where I am. She didn't show up. Tony is already sedated and asleep."

"Maybe that's it," Ellen said. "Alexa said something about trying to fit in a short appointment. She could've called from the car, found out he was asleep, and gone to the meeting instead."

"You're probably right."

I hung up and dialed our house. The phone rang ten times before the machine picked up.

I tried her cell. It went straight to voice mail.

I wondered where she was.

3

HE CHANGED ALL the admittance forms,” the pretty nurse said. She was tall with a lean body and glossy black hair. Her nametag identified her as Sheala Whitman, RN. We were standing by the check-in desk and the admitting clerk reached across the counter and handed me the forms I’d filled out twenty minutes earlier identifying the patient as Jonathan Bodine, address unknown. That name had been erased on the top of the page and something illegible was now smudged there in pencil.

“Can’t read this,” I said, squinting at the writing. “He told me his name was Jonathan Bodine.”

“Now he’s Samik Mampuna, Crown Prince of the Bassaland,” the nurse said. “He says he’s from the Bassa Tribe that lives in the Central African rainforest.”

“Prince Mampuna,” I said, trying to sound impressed. “We should all be sure and get our pictures taken with him before he jumps on the royal jet back to Africa.”

She didn't think it was funny. "We need his real name on the admitting form."

"Look, Nurse Whitman, the guy's not quite there. He stepped in front of my car and I'm trying to do the right thing and get him fixed up. If he wants to be Crown Prince Mampuna, I'm all for it. He's just a homeless guy who hears voices and needs medical help. The city will pay for this. What's the problem?"

"And you're Shane Scully of the LAPD," she said.

"Mostly I'm Shane Scully of the LAPD, except when I'm Lord Bullwinkle, the Vicar of Kent." I gave her a loony smile and she finally relented, stifling a laugh.

"Okay. He's all yours, Lord Bullwinkle. Get him outta here. None of us down here can take much more."

What happened next was right out of a Steve Martin movie. I bundled him into my car and drove from the ER back to the Nickel. My theory was, when trying to return something, it's usually a good idea to put it back exactly where you found it.

"I'm just gonna drop you on the corner of Alameda and Sixth," I said casually. I was in a hurry to get all his junk out of my car and go home to Alexa.

"Ain't no good squat spots on Sixth. Assholes all whizzin' by like there ain't no tomorrow. All a buncha reckless-don't-give-a-damn-hit-and-run half-steppers, like you."

"Right. Okay." I choked down a few more confrontational responses. "So, where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere but the VOA," he said, referring to the Volunteers of America drop-in center. "Them Bible-beaters all hump yer leg fer Jesus. Maybe the Southern . . ."

The Southern is a recently remodeled single-room-occupancy hotel on Fifth Street across from San Julian Park. For years it had been a hellhole where street people would pay for their drugs at the front desk and then go stand behind the hotel and wait for the dealer to drop the cut down from the roof in baggies. A developer took it over, cleaned it up, and renovated. Single rooms went to homeless people for about one hundred ninety dollars a month. For SRO housing, that was considered pricey.