

stephen j.

cannell

A
SHANE SCULLY
NOVEL

By the
Bestselling
Author of
*The Tin
Collectors*

the viking
funeral

A Los Angeles Police badge is shown at an angle, partially obscured by intense orange and yellow flames that fill the background. The badge features the words "POLICE" and "LOS ANGELES POLICE" and a central seal.

THE
VIKING
FUNERAL

ALSO BY STEPHEN J. CANNELL

The Tin Collectors

King Con

Riding the Snake

The Devil's Workshop

Final Victim

The Plan

THE
VIKING
FUNERAL

STEPHEN J.
CANNELL

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DEDICATION

I was sitting having lunch in a Hollywood restaurant with my friend Bill Gately, a lean, dark-haired, intense man who often speaks in whispers. Suddenly Bill leaned forward and said, “Hey, Steve, you ever hear of the parallel market?”

Bill had recently pulled the pin after a distinguished career at the U.S. Customs Service, where he ended up as the Assistant Special Agent in charge of the Los Angeles office. The year before, he had supervised the now-famous Casablanca bank sting. In that covert operation, which was run inside Mexico, he ended up busting dozens of Mexican bankers who had been secretly laundering billions of dollars in Colombian drug money, escaping detection by wiring funds bank to bank.

In my opinion, Bill Gately is one of America’s heroes. He has spent his life holding the fort against international crime syndicates, often risking his career and life, to bring dangerous criminals to justice. So naturally, when Bill talks, I listen.

I told him I had never heard of the parallel market.

What he explained to me at that lunch two years ago eventually became the basis for this novel. Without Bill, I would not have been able to write *The Viking Funeral*, because I would have been just as blind to its devastating effects as I’m sure the rest of you are.

While this is a work of fiction, it is based on fact. These facts have been overlooked or scrupulously hidden by our own government.

The stated reasons for this oversight defy logic.

When you read this, I hope you will become as outraged as I am.

For
WILLIAM GATELY
Friend, Colleague,
American Hero

THE IDEA

Police officers must agree on a certain set of philosophies, because there cannot be a rule for everything.

*L.A.P.D. Management Guide
to Discipline*

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FUNERAL

1 JODY

LOOKING BACK, IT was pretty strange that just the night before, they'd been talking about Jody Dean. Shane and Alexa had been in Shane's bedroom in the Venice house; Chooch was in the front room doing his homework.

Here's how it happened. . . .

It was six in the evening, and the conversation took place after they'd been making love, Shane draping his arms protectively around Alexa's narrow waist, smelling the sweet scent of her, feeling her soft rhythmic breathing on his neck. He was still inside her, both of them trying to sustain the afterglow of lovemaking for as long as possible, staring into each other's eyes, communicating on levels much deeper than words could convey.

He'd been building up to it for months, but it was right then,

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at that particular moment, that Shane decided he would ask this incredible woman to be his wife, to share his life and help raise his son, Chooch. All he needed to do was determine the timing of the proposal. Maybe Sunday night, after the awards ceremony. But soon, because he now knew he had to add her to his life. . .to his and Chooch's.

A swift series of connect-the-dot thoughts followed, and his mind was suddenly on Jody: Jody Dean, who wouldn't be at the wedding, standing at Shane's side, as they had both once promised each other. Jody wouldn't be standing up for Shane as Shane had for him, his raucous humor making everything funnier and more exciting, pouring insight and personality over Shane's special day. "Jodyizing the deal," he would have called it. And then, tumbling over this thought, a tidal wave of sadness and loss.

Alexa was looking into his eyes and must have seen his gaze gutter and dim, because she suddenly asked him what he was thinking, and that was how his best friend's name came up the day before Shane's whole world changed.

"I was thinking about Jody," Shane said, not explaining how Jody had entered his mind during postcoital sex, when his thoughts should have been on her. She lay in his arms and nodded, maybe frowning slightly, but it was hard to tell because they were so close together. He could see only her eyes and they had not changed, still soft with love.

"Oh" was all she had said, but she shifted slightly and Shane came out of her.

"I was thinking how he would have been happy for us," Shane had tried to explain, still not confessing his real train of thought.

Alexa hadn't known Jody, not really. . .station-house war

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stories, mostly, and opinions; there was certainly no shortage of either where Jody was concerned. Jody had been assigned to the Special Investigations Section—SIS—when. . . when he. . .well. . .when he did the unthinkable.

Alexa had been running the Southwest Patrol Day Watch back then. Of course, she knew how the event had busted Shane up, how it still deeply affected him. After all, Jody had been like a brother. Jody's family had been like Shane's family. The Deans, with their wealth and position, never once made Shane feel like what he knew he was—a socially inept, unclaimed orphan from the Huntington House Group Home. They had cared about him when Shane had nobody who cared. Jody had been like a brother all through elementary school, high school, and the Marines. Actually, if you wanted to be absolutely accurate, all the way from Little League through the Police Academy.

But there was something else about Jody, something even harder to define, which Shane had often thought about but never completely understood. He had finally come to accept it simply as Jody's aura, or Jody's "mojo"—some force of personality that made his ideas seem better, his jokes funnier, his world slightly brighter. It had even been there at the very beginning, when they were only seven or eight, back at the very start, from that first day at Ryder Field, that first Pirate Little League practice.

Shane had been dropped off by the volunteer driver of the Huntington House van and had joined the team. He didn't have a father or mother to cheer him on, or a family to buy his uniform—Jody's father stood in on both counts. Jody had had a startling effect on him from that very first day. He had it on everyone, children and adults alike—almost hypnotic.

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You knew that if you did it his way, it would just be more fun, more exciting and that in the end it would come out all right, even though sometimes it didn't. Sometimes Jody's way produced disaster. But with Jody, even disaster could be an E-ticket event, where if you held on tight, you could come off the ride, adrenalized and miraculously unhurt. Shane had been Jody's best friend, right next to all that pulsing, hard-to-define excitement; ringmaster of the Jody Dean Circus. Everybody always came to Shane, trying to get him to do their commercials, to sell their ideas to Jody. Everybody knew that Jody was destined for greatness, until that August day in the police parking lot, when. . .when it. . .well. . .when the unthinkable happened.

Alexa rolled away from him and sat up on the side of the bed, cutting off that string of painful recollections. "Jody's dead, honey. He's been dead for three years." She said it softly, but there was concern in her tone, as if no good would come of this.

"I know. . . . It's just. . . I was thinking he'd be happy for us, that's all," eager to change the subject now, almost popping the question right then, to refocus the energy in the bedroom. If he had, it all probably would have come out differently. But something. . .maybe all those dark memories, stopped him.

"It's enough for me that *we're* happy for us, and that Chooch is happy."

"I know. . . ." But his voice sounded wistful and small. He knew that she was jealous and frightened of these Jody thoughts—feelings and memories that she had never been a part of, that had once led Shane to the edge of a dangerous crack in his psyche, then to his spiraling depression in the months just before they met. It was hard to explain to her what

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Jody Dean meant, what an important part of Shane's personal history he was. She couldn't understand what the loss of Jody had done to Shane and how it had changed him. Until Chooch and Alexa came into his life, he'd been ticktocking along, heading slowly but surely toward his own dark end.

Alexa got out of bed and started to dress. Her suitcase was open on the bedroom sofa, and she had already finished packing her things, getting ready to move out of Shane's house for the week that her brother was in town.

"Buddy comes in on American Airlines tomorrow morning," she said, changing the subject.

"I'll be there, ten o'clock. Then dinner at the beach at seven. I got it all down," his tone still hectored by a confusing recipe of Jody thoughts that he couldn't completely decipher, even after all these years.

She turned and looked at him. "You all right with this?" she suddenly asked, picking up on his sharp tone, but not the reason for it. He knew she wasn't talking about Jody now or picking up her brother, but rather the awards ceremony this coming Sunday afternoon. She was going to receive the LAPD Medal of Valor for a case he'd originally discovered, then ended up working on with her. He was not being recognized. Of course, during that investigation Shane had broken more rules than the West Hollywood Vice Squad. The case and Shane's misconduct had been written up in the *Los Angeles Times*—twenty-five column inches, with color photographs describing all of his transgressions. In the face of that, the department couldn't award him the medal.

During the week they worked the case, Shane had taken a confusing emotional journey from pure hatred of Alexa Hamilton to grudging respect, to finally knowing that she was the

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most special person he had ever met. The case had turned his life around. Not only had he fallen in love, but Sandy Sandoval, a beautiful police informant he had once managed, confessed just before she died that her fifteen-year-old son, Chooch, was Shane's love child. Suddenly, his life had new meaning. In the end, the mayor and the police chief had both been arrested, along with a famous Hollywood producer and a real-estate tycoon. That was why Alexa was getting the M.O.V. on Sunday and why her older brother was coming to town to watch her receive it.

"I've got to get the budget review for DSG wrapped up before the end of the week." She was talking fast now, quickly getting dressed, inserting her small, department-approved brass stud earrings while trying to switch off the dark energy of Jody Dean.

She was referring to the annual budget for the Detective Services Group, where she had just been assigned as the executive officer. Normally the XO at an Administrative Operations Bureau would be a lieutenant, but Alexa, though still a sergeant, was on the lieutenant's list, third tier. She was probably less than a month away from getting her bars.

Shane got off the bed, his thoughts of Jody Dean left drifting in the wake of this new conversation.

"I'm gonna go say good-bye to Chooch," she said as she ran her fingers through her shoulder-length black hair, then turned and snapped her suitcase shut, presenting him with her classic profile for a moment. His heart clutched. . . . *God, she is beautiful.* Then she carried the suitcase out and set it down in the hall next to the front door. A moment later Shane trailed her out of the bedroom.

Chooch was not studying for his final exams at the desk in

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the den, where he did his homework. Shane looked out the back window and saw that Alexa had already found him in the backyard, seated in a metal chair, going over a vocabulary list for tomorrow's test. Shane watched through the window as Chooch stood and Alexa reached out and took his hand. His sixteen-year-old son was tall and had his deceased mother's Hispanic good looks. The waters of the Venice, California, canals dappled late-afternoon sunlight across their features. Alexa was looking up at the six-foot-tall boy, who seemed intense and serious, nodding at whatever it was she was saying. As he watched them, he thought they seemed perfect together, standing, talking earnestly in the backyard of his little Venice canal house. He liked what he saw, what he felt—liked the sense of calm that all this laid against his once turbulent interior. Then Alexa leaned forward and kissed Chooch on the cheek, and he hugged her.

Shane's mind flipped back once again. *Too bad Jody isn't here to see this*, he thought.

Then he opened the door and went out into the yard to join them.

THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS

• • • **S**O COACH FRY says that they have this camp every year. It's up by San Francisco, and he says he's gonna call and find out if there's still a place. That is, if it's okay with you," Chooch said, looking over at Shane, wondering which way it was going to go. They were in Alexa's powder blue Subaru, on the way to Harvard Westlake School the next morning, the morning it happened—Friday morning.

"How long is the camp?" Shane asked.

"Coach said it's about a month. It starts next week, June seventh. After school gets out."

Shane nodded. He was worried about expenses, but Sandy's estate had left money in trust for Chooch, and part of his new

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responsibility as a parent was to provide enriching life experiences. On the other hand, he wasn't sure that the Jim Plunkett Quarterback Camp in Palo Alto, California, qualified as life enrichment. But Chooch had a great arm, and the football coach said he would probably start at quarterback his sophomore year.

Shane had spent afternoons after his therapy sessions standing on the sidelines at Zanut Field, watching spring ball. Chooch in practice pads, his silver helmet shining in the afternoon sun, taking his five-step drop, setting up, rifling passes to streaking wideouts on long fade or post patterns. He had to admit that his son looked good, but he was hesitant to let him go, to lose him for even a few days, let alone a month. Sandy had raised him for the first fifteen years of his life, and Shane had no idea he was the boy's father. Now, after Sandy's death, Shane was Chooch's sole parent. The newness of this obligation produced a degree of anxiety. Indecision enveloped both of them, swirling around in the front seat of Alexa's car like a sandlot dust devil.

"Why don't you ask him to make a call, find out what the deal is," Shane finally compromised.

"Solid." Chooch grinned at him.

Shane had just transitioned to the 101 Freeway and edged Alexa's car into the right lane to get off at Coldwater, where Harvard Westlake School was located. Sandy had enrolled Chooch there, and Shane was now paying the tuition—more than ten thousand dollars a year—from Chooch's trust account.

"Bud," he said softly. "Not to change the subject, but I need to get your take on something."

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“The Chooch Scully Store of ‘Sagacious’ Advice is open,” he said, using one of his new “vocab” words Shane had tested him on last night, after Alexa had left.

“I know you like Alexa. I know she’s important to you, right?”

“She’s the other level, man, you know that.”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I was wondering. . .how would you feel about putting her into our deal, full-time?”

“You mean you’re gonna knock off this light-housekeeping thing you’ve been doing and finally give her a long-term contract?”

“That’s the idea,” Shane said, smiling. “But I don’t want to ask her unless you’re okay with it.”

“If you can get her to say yes, then get after it, dude. ’Cause you an’ me won’t ever do any better.”

Shane smiled and looked over at Chooch, who was grinning openly.

“Okay, okay, good deal,” Shane responded with relief.

Soon they were in the line of cars in front of Harvard Westlake. As they pulled up to the drop zone, Chooch grabbed his book bag from the backseat, then hesitated. “Don’t screw up the proposal,” he said. “Get a good ring, no zirconias. And I wanna preview the pitch. I wanna hear how you’re gonna say it. You can practice on me, y’know, so you don’t boot it.”

“Come on, whatta I look like?”

“Like you’re in over your head.” Chooch grinned. “I don’t want you t’blow us out on some whack move.”

Shane raised his right hand and Chooch high-fived it. “Good luck on your English final,” Shane said, and Chooch nodded his thanks. Then he was out of the car, still smiling as he

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walked up the path toward the classroom. He was instantly joined by two friends, both girls.

Shane pulled the Subaru back onto Coldwater, got on the 101 heading west, on his way to the 405 South. He would probably arrive at LAX an hour early to pick up Alexa's brother Bud, but Shane figured he could get some coffee at the American Airlines terminal amid the passenger rush, and plan this new part of his life. He was breezing along in the middle lane up over the hill, passing Sunset. He had his left arm on the open window, feeling the warm June air in his face, hidee-hoeing along, his mind freewheeling, when he glanced over and saw the Al Capone Ride—the lowered orange and black muscle car with a strange, thin layer of black dust all over it. The car was tracking along next to him in the fast lane. The man behind the wheel was looking straight ahead, up the freeway, his curly blond hair and short beard whipping in the slipstreaming wind.

Shane's heart actually stopped. . .like when you're about to get very lucky or very dead. The driver looked over at him.

It was Jody Dean.

They stared at each other for almost ten seconds, racing along, door handle to door handle, at sixty, sixty-five miles an hour, both of them frozen by the complicated moment.

Shane was filled with thoughts too mixed up to fully deal with, thoughts that started out as questions but boomeranged back as unbelievable dilemmas. His dead best friend was ten feet away, speeding along, staring over at him from the fast lane. Jody Dean, who had committed suicide, shooting himself in the Valley Division parking lot three years ago, leaving his fly-specked, stiffening corpse sprawled in the front seat of a

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Department L car for the shocked officers of SIS to discover. Shane's mind double-clutched, missed the shift, and redlined dangerously. How could Jody Dean be alive? It was impossible. Jody had eaten his gun, put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger, turned his brains into blood mist. Shane Scully, his best friend, his Little League catcher and soul mate, had carried the coffin, watched it go into the furnace, cried over the urn as he handed it to Jody's grieving widow. In the months that followed, before Alexa saved him, Shane had started circling the drain himself, getting closer and closer, following Jody into the same suicidal vortex.

So how could Jody be in the fast lane of the 405, driving a dirty black and orange '76 Charger, not ten feet from him? Suddenly, Jody's expression changed, became hardened with recognition and resolve. Shane's attempt at a logical explanation was unhinged by that determined look on Jody Dean's face.

You see, Shane *knew* that look. There was no mistaking it. He'd seen that look a thousand times, going all the way back to Little League. Ten-year-old Jody, on the mound staring in at nine-year-old Shane behind the plate. *That look on his face, and in his eyes, stone cut and insistent.* Shane, crouching behind the plate, clad in his catcher's gear, each sending the other thought vibes. A silent conversation nobody else could hear. *We gotta give him the rainbow curve, man. . .or give him the slider. . . .* Jody, reading these thoughts and shaking his head even before Shane's fingers flashed the sign. *Nothin' doin', Hot Sauce. . .gonna throw the heater,* he telepathed back as clear as if he had walked up and shouted it at Shane. That was what was happening right now. Jody's thoughts shooting across the painted lane dividers from the Charger's front seat, shooting a

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vibe. . .a warning, plain as if Jody had shouted it: *Forget this, man. Forget you ever saw me.* And then, some kind of goodbye: *See ya. Sorry.* . . .

Suddenly, Jody floored the dust-covered Charger, shooting ahead, changing lanes around a slow-moving truck.

“No!” Shane’s voice was a strangled plea. “Don’t go! Not again!”

Shane pushed the pedal all the way to the floor, but Alexa’s Subaru was underpowered, winding up slowly like a twenty-year-old air-raid siren, taking its time to reach full power, its thin whine lost behind the Charger’s four-barrel roar. Finally, Shane was going almost a hundred, chasing the vanishing muscle car between semis and soccer moms, businessmen and airport taxis, weaving dangerously in and out amid a chorus of blaring horns and unheard curses.

The Charger was ahead, gaining ground, its loose but empty chrome license-plate holder winking morning sunlight back at him.

Suddenly, Jody cut off a Ryder van and the top-heavy rent-a-truck, with its inexperienced driver, started pinwheeling across all four lanes. In seconds, it was directly in front of the Subaru. Shane had a scary two seconds as he tried to avoid death at a hundred miles an hour. Alexa’s car, broke loose, swapping ends. Then he was carouseling wildly down the freeway: the landscape strobing past his windshield—dangerous, disembodied glimpses of trees, guardrails, and concrete abutments. A kaleidoscope of images on spin cycle. . .Around and around the Subaru went, metal lint on the busy L.A. freeway, until he saw the end coming. A bridge abutment spun into view like a huge concrete iceberg.

Shane fed the little Japanese car some gas, trying to

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straighten out the spin. He caught some traction, and the car made a try at straightening out, but he was still crooked and sliding sideways when he hit the wall of concrete, slamming into it hard. He felt the whole right side of Alexa's car explode, as door handles, side mirrors and paint all disintegrated or flew free, followed a second later by the whole left door—all of this accompanied by the scream of tortured metal. Shane was staring at blurred concrete graffiti and tagger art grinding and strobing past the doorless opening like the scenery wheel in an eighth-grade play.

The Subaru finally shuddered to a halt, and then it was over. He was sitting in the car, stuck in the fast lane, facing the wrong way, his heart jackhammering in his chest.

Shane spun around and looked out the back window. The black and orange Charger was nowhere to be found.

Jody Dean was gone as suddenly as he had reappeared.

YOU'RE OUTTA THERE

OKAY, SO HOW do I bullshit my way out of this one? I'm a police officer, trained to make split-second observations but also regarded by the department as something of a head case. I'm forced to sit in a cracked vinyl La-Z-Boy three times a week while an overweight, balding therapist looks across at me over templed fingers, saying, "Uh-huh," "I see," and "How does that make you feel?"

His career was already in big trouble. This little story about seeing a dead man on the 405 Freeway would make him look as though he'd started carrying his shit around in a sock.

Shane sat in the office of the towing company, waiting for the cab he'd called, looking out the window at a crumpled gallery of traffic mistakes, the latest of which was Alexa's little Subaru. Aside from the destroyed right side, the car looked

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badly torqued to him. If the frame was bent, it was a total. Right on top of this sobering realization, his cell phone rang. He dug it out.

“Shane, where are you? Bud just called, and nobody was at the airport. He had to take a cab.” Alexa sounded annoyed.

Shane had completely forgotten about Bud, the breakfast-food salesman. Shane had never met Bud but had talked to him once or twice on the phone. His booming “Hey, pal” voice always seemed jovial while still managing to convey displeasure.

“I’m sorry, honey. I hate to tell you this, but I had an accident in the Subaru.”

“Are you okay?” Instant concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” But of course, he wasn’t. He was close to hysteria, his whole body shaking, his nerves buzzing like a desert power line.

“I’m great,” he lied, then added, “I need to talk to you. We need to sit down. I’m taking a cab over to the Glass House. I should be there in half an hour.”

“Shane, I—”

“Look, I’m sorry about Buddy and the car. I’m afraid I really boxed it.”

“I don’t care about the car, Shane. As long as you’re okay, that’s all that matters.”

Through the fly-specked office window, Shane saw the Yellow Cab pull into the tow company’s parking lot. A round-shouldered Melrose cowboy, wearing a plaid shirt and a silver buckle the size of an ashtray, got out and started looking around for his fare. Shane motioned to him.

“Cab’s here. I’ll be there in forty minutes.”

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“Shane, you know I’m swamped getting this financial review finished.”

“I need help. Something just came up. I can’t go into it on the phone.”

“Okay, then let’s try meeting at the Peking Duck. It’s fast. We can grab something while we talk, but gimme at least an hour.”

“Okay,” he said, and closed the phone. He heaved himself up and walked on stringy, oxygen-starved muscles out of the tow-service waiting room, then got into the Yellow Cab.

They were on the 405 heading back to L.A., Shane sitting quietly in the backseat behind the driver, looking for his bridge abutment, finally seeing the crash site sliding by across six lanes of traffic at Howard Hughes Parkway. A pound of rubber and a powder-blue slash of paint. His accident, like a thousand others, was now immortalized on freeway concrete, insignificant as a sauna-room butt mark.

A block from Parker Center was the Peking Duck, which was actually now called Kim Young’s. It had been sold by the original owners after an armed robbery attempt, but the old sign was still hanging out front. Kim Young had bought the restaurant from his cousin, who retired, giving up his American Dream after four dust bunnies in ski masks had tried to take the place, unaware that half the LAPD Glass House Day Watch lunched there. This criminal brain trust of highwaymen had just pulled their breakdowns out from under cool street dusters when they were surprised to hear half a dozen automatics trombone loudly behind them. They spun around and in seconds ate enough lead to qualify as the second-largest metal deposit in California. It took a crane to lift them into the coroner’s van.

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Shane took a booth in the back. The restaurant had linoleum floors and was always noisy. He sat alone, waving at a few friends who came in but not over.

He thought about Jody—or more correctly, how he would explain what he had seen to Alexa. His mind was already hunting for a way out: shifting details to make them seem more acceptable, eliminating facts, pulling them this way and that. Piece by piece, he was trying to arrange the event so that it would become at least digestible, removing one crumb at a time, working to make it disappear, his thoughts like ants struggling to carry away a picnic. However, this was too big. He had to deal with it. But how? What should he do? How could he explain it?

Ten minutes later Alexa entered the place, and Shane heard the volume of conversation dip as forty or fifty guys whispered her arrival across tables stacked with egg rolls and dim sum. Then again, maybe that was just his jealous imagination—he wasn't sure. She walked toward him, her hips swaying slightly, her slender calves flexing.

She slid in, reached across the table, and squeezed his hand. “You sure you’re okay? No whiplash?” she asked, concerned.

“Yeah, but your car is junk. A sea anchor.”

“If it saved your life, it did its job.” She smiled. “I’ll cash the insurance and get a red one. I was tired of powder blue anyway.”

Then, almost without knowing how he started, he was telling her, talking about seeing the Charger, seeing Jody Dean looking back at him across a lane of traffic, the heart-stopping moment of recognition. . . And then, Jody, taking off, leaving Shane in the dust; the Ryder van pinwheeling in front of him

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until the Subaru finally ground to a halt under the bridge on the Howard Hughes Parkway.

Alexa didn't say anything while he was telling it. "Shane," she said after he had finished. "Jody is *dead*. We talked about it last night. What is it? Why do you insist on? . . ." She didn't finish, but instead, let go of his hand.

"His suicide never made sense to me. . . . I couldn't believe he'd kill himself," Shane said. "He wasn't the kind of guy who eats his gun."

"Yet cops who seem normal do it all the time. . . . When it's a good friend, it's just harder to accept."

"Alexa, I may be going through a psychiatric review, but I'm not a psycho."

"Jody is dead," she repeated. "You carried his box to the furnace—gave his ashes to his wife. You *know* he's gone."

"Then who did I see on the freeway? He ran, Alexa. Took off. I crashed because he cut off a truck and it almost hit me. Why would he run if it wasn't Jody?"

She sat there quietly, looking at him, for a long time, trying to find the right thing to say. Then she lowered her voice and leaned toward him. "I want you to let this go. Okay? I want you to keep quiet about it and let it go."

"Don't think it'll look good in my package? Help dress up my psychiatric review?" he said sarcastically.

She smiled a tight smile. "I'm sure there's some explanation. Jody's body was identified by his wife and by his commander at Detective Services Group. . . who was it back then?"

"Captain Medwick."

"Right. Carl Medwick. He and Lauren wouldn't identify the body if Jody wasn't dead."

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“Yeah. . .yeah. . .of course. Probably not.” The conversation stopped, but these ideas lay between them, festering malignantly.

“You just saw somebody who looked like Jody,” she added.

Ants working hard, tugging at crumbs, still trying to make this untidy idea go away.

“Of course, you’re right,” he said, with more enthusiasm.

“That’s gotta be it. Gotta be. And he ran because. . .because . . .” He looked up for help.

“Because, sometimes, Shane, when you stare at people, you can look very ferocious. The driver of that Charger just got scared.”

A big piece, an important piece, dragged. . .hauled, actually, to the edge of the blanket, but not gone. . .not quite yet.

“You’re right,” he said. “Shit, I probably scared the poor guy, whoever he was, half to death.”

“I’ve seen you do it.”

“He probably thought I was some lane-change killer about to pull a gun and start blasting.”

They both sat there anxiously, trying to buy it, hoping for the best, like family members waiting for a biopsy.

“Yeah. . .God, what was I thinking? The guy sure looked like Jody, but it wasn’t him. Couldn’t’ve been,” Shane said.

Alexa nodded.

But as he sat there in the Peking Duck trying to convince himself, he remembered that look again—Jody’s look. In his memory he saw little ten-year-old Jody, standing on the mound, shaking off signs in frustration, sending Shane his own brand of telepathy. . .Jody-thoughts coming in on their special frequency. With this realization, the self-deception ended. It was Jody in that Charger, talking to Shane without having to speak,

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just like in Little League. *Stop screwing around, man. . . . I'm gonna throw the heater.* Rearing back, going into his windup, burning it in there. . . . Shane, knowing the pitch without even flashing the sign. Cowhide slapping leather. Fastball. Right down the old pipe.

Strike three, asshole. . . . You're outta there!