

The Pallbearers by Stephen J. Cannell

CHAPTER 3

Diamond Peterson told me that the funeral was going to be at the old Surfers' Church located on Cliffside Drive, overlooking the public beach at Point Dume. It was scheduled for the day after tomorrow, when we were planning to be in Hawaii.

I hung up and turned to face Alexa, who could read my devastation. She knew bad news was coming.

"Problems?"

"Yeah." I stood there, trying to get the right words.

"Come on, buddy. Just lay it on me," Alexa said. "Something go wrong with one of your current cases?"

"You remember Walter Dix?"

She frowned slightly, found the memory, and nodded. "From the group home?"

"He's dead."

Her expression changed, saddened by sympathy. "I'm so sorry, Shane. I know how important he was to you growing up."

"Suicide," I said, trying to fit that idea into a mosaic of things I knew about Pop. Some guys are suicide types— brooders, drinkers, mood flippers, tight winds. Pop was none of those. He was the perennial optimist, a hang- loose guy who loved to laugh.

Even though he ran a foster- care home packed with depressing social casualties, he saw the world as a place of constant opportunity.

There was always a party wave out there. He knew it was coming and would be large enough for all of us to ride. He believed in miracles.

He didn't seem to me like someone who would commit suicide.

But then, how did I really know? I'd ditched him like a bad date. I hadn't been back there to see him in years. And the few times I did go, I'd been awkwardly subdued. We'd been on the same page when I was a kid, but we struggled to communicate as adults. I'd told myself the reason for this was that all we had in common were bad memories of my childhood, which neither of us wanted to revisit.

This excuse suddenly seemed like an artful dodge to avoid a painful self- evaluation. I suspected the real reason I didn't go was because Walt was a witness to a different Shane Scully, a mean angry bully who I no longer liked. I'd been staying away because he knew about parts of me that I was trying to either eliminate or forget.

If I thought about it, I didn't really know Walter Dix as he was today at all. I knew who he said he was, but sometimes there's a big gap between that and the real thing. Maybe under those crinkly smile lines and the surfer disguise, something darker was hiding. I couldn't trust my recollections as a child and hadn't invested enough interest as a man to have a valid opinion.

"When's the funeral?" Alexa asked, getting to the meat of it before I had a chance to bring up that problem.

“Day after tomorrow.”

“You need to go,” she said, instantly knocking three days off a vacation we’d carefully planned and had been desperately looking forward to.

“Yeah,” I said.

She took a step forward and held my hand. “It’s okay, honey. Ten days in paradise is still nothing to complain about. It’ll give me time to refine my wardrobe selections.”

“He left a note. He wants me to be a pallbearer.”

She stood there thinking, remembering the few things I’d told her over the years. “But you . . .”

“Yeah. Shallow, selfish bastard that I am, I’ve barely talked to him in twenty-five years.”

“Come on, Shane, stop it.”

My thoughts suddenly started shooting all over the place. The Huntington House home; the early morning surf trips to the beach; toys Pop had bought for us with his own money; coaching our baseball and soccer teams; a sad memory of him sitting next to Theresa Rodriguez’s bed one night, holding one of her horribly scarred hands while she cried.

“Where’s the funeral?” Alexa said, trying to jog me out of what she could see was a developing funk.

“Surfers’ Church in Point Dume. Never been there. She said it was on a cliff overlooking the steeps.”

“Steeps?”

“Surfer talk— what Walt called waves. He also called them glass walls, cylinders, the green room. . . . Everything was surf lingo with him.” My voice was dulled by emotion.

“How ’bout I fix us a drink? This mess in here can wait. I’ve got plenty of time to pack now.”

She put on a robe, fixed me a light scotch, and got one for herself.

We went back outside and sat on the patio. I could still feel remnants of my body heat coming off the iron chair from before. My world had totally shifted before the metal even had time to cool. Things were different. A little piece of my past had been torn out and had just floated away. Some things lost can never be retrieved. I had lost my chance to say thank you, and now all that was left to do was carry Pop’s coffin and say good-bye.

Again, Alexa read me. “He understood, Shane.”

I turned and looked at her.

“How could he?”

“It wasn’t all about you. Some of it was about him.”

Of course, she was right about that. But he’d been there for me when it counted and if he was so desperate he’d committed suicide, why had I not been around to know that and repay the favor? I’d been in the military when his wife, Elizabeth, had died. Stationed far away. No help. I sent him cards at Christmas, paid one or two visits. Not enough. But the reason was simple. I just didn’t want to go back there. I couldn’t. So I rarely had.

Alexa and I sat in silence until the sun went down. I said very little because I was deep inside my own head. I saw her shiver slightly

in a descending ocean mist.

“You go on in. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She got up, kissed the top of my head, and went into the house.

I began letting the thoughts I’d pushed aside for all those years flood back.

I remembered old feelings. The anger, the hatred, the need to strike out and hurt someone. I thought about living in a group home full of angry, similarly rejected children. None of us trusted or liked the others.

There had only been Pop to lean on.

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