

The Pallbearers by Stephen J. Cannell

CHAPTER 2

“This hotel is gonna cost us a fortune,” I said, looking at the brochure of the beautiful Waikiki Hilton. The photo showed a huge structure right on the beach in Honolulu. “You sure you got us the full off season discount?”

I called this question inside to my wife, Alexa, while sitting out in our backyard in Venice, holding a beer and warming my spot on one of our painted metal porch chairs. Our adopted marmalade cat, Franco, was curled up nearby. He looked like he was asleep, but he was faking. I could tell because he was subtly working his ears with every sound. Cat radar. The colorful evening sky reflected an orange sunset in the flat mirrored surface of the Venice Grand Canal. It was peaceful. I was feeling mellow.

Alexa came out of the sliding- glass door wearing a skimpy string bikini. She looked unbelievably hot— beautiful figure, long legs, coal-black hair, with a model’s high cheekbones under piercing aqua-blue eyes.

“Ta- da,” she said, announcing herself with her own chord. She stood before me, modeling the bathing suit. “You like, mister? Want kissy-kissy?”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her down onto my lap.

“You are not wearing that in public. But get thee to the bedroom, wench.” I grinned and nuzzled her behind the ear as I picked her up to carry her inside.

“Put me down.” She laughed. “We’ll get to that later. I’m trying to pack.”

We were leaving tomorrow for Hawaii. It was our annual two week LAPD-mandated vacation. I could hardly wait to get away.

As usual, we’d timed our vacation periods to coincide, and for fourteen glorious days I’d have no homicides to investigate, no gruesome crime-scene photos or forensic reports to study, no grieving families to console. Only acres of white sand and surf with my gorgeous wife in paradise.

Alexa had worked twelve-hour days for a week to get her office squared away so she could afford the time off. Alexa is a lieutenant and the acting commander of the Detective Division of the LAPD.

She's about to make captain, and the job will then be made permanent. That makes her technically my boss. I'm a D-3 working out of the elite homicide squad known as Homicide Special, where we handle all of L.A.'s media-worthy, high-profile murders. It's a good gig, but I was feeling burned out and needed some time away.

"Put me down. That's a direct order, Detective," she said, faking her LAPD command voice.

"You can give the orders in that squirrel cage downtown, but at home it's best two out of three falls, and in that outfit, get ready to be pinned."

"You brute. Stop making promises and get to it, then." She kissed me.

I was trying to get the sliding-glass door opened without dropping her. I barely made it, and lugged her across the carpet into the bedroom, which was littered with her resort outfits. It looked like a bomb had gone off in a clothing store. Bathing suits, shorts, and tops scattered everywhere.

"What happened in here?" I said and dropped her on the bed, then dove on top of her.

Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I am to have won her. I'm a scarred, scabrous piece of work with a nose that's been broken too many times and dark hair that never quite lays down. Alexa is so beautiful she takes my breath away. How I ended up with her is one of my life's major mysteries.

I reached for the string tie on her bikini and she rolled right, laughing as I grabbed her arm to pull her back. Just then, the phone rang.

"If that's your office again, I'm gonna load up and clean out that entire floor of gold-braid pussies you work with," I said, only half in jest.

The phone kept blasting us with electronic urgency. It was quickly ruining the moment. Alexa rolled off the bed and snatched it up. "Yes?" Then she paused. "Who is this?" She hesitated. "Just a minute."

She turned toward me, covering the receiver with her palm. "You know somebody named Diamond Peterson?"

"No, but if she's related to Diamond Cutter, tell her she's killing her little brother."

"Stop bragging about your wood and take this." Alexa grinned, handing me the phone.

I sat on the side of the bed and put the receiver to my ear.

“Yes? This is Detective Scully.”

“You’re a police detective?” a female voice said with a slight ghetto accent. She sounded surprised.

“Who is this again?”

“Diamond Peterson. I’m calling from Huntington House Group Home.” The mention of the group home shot darkness through me. Memories of that part of my life were negative and confusing. I now only visit them occasionally in dreams.

“How can I help you, Ms. Peterson?” I asked cautiously.

“It’s about Walter Dix. Since you’re in the police, I assume you’ve heard.”

“Heard what? Is Pop okay?”

“Not hardly.” She hesitated, then let out a breath that sounded like a sigh and plunged ahead. “Pop’s dead.”

A wave of feelings cascaded through me. When they settled, the emotion on top was guilt. I had left Walt and the group home in my rearview mirror decades ago. I had been studiously ignoring the man who had injected the only bit of positive energy into my life growing up—the man to whom I probably owed a large portion of my eventual survival. Pop provided a thread of hope that had been all that was left when I hit rock bottom eight years ago.

Even during my lowest days, because of Pop, I clung to the belief that there was still some good in the world despite the fact that by the time I reached my mid-thirties, I’d managed to find almost none.

It was hard to know the complete mixture of events that had finally led to my salvation. The easy ones to spot were Alexa, and my now-grown son, Chooch, who was attending USC on a football ride.

But Pop was also there in a big way. He had somehow convinced me that it was possible to survive a horrible start where I was left unattended in a hospital waiting room, a nameless baby with no parents, who was then shuffled off to a county infant orphanage.

Child Protective Services had finally placed me at Huntington House at the age of six, but by then I was already starting to rot from the inside. It marked the beginning of a life of loneliness, which was only occasionally interrupted by a parade of strangers.

Once or twice a year I was forced to put on my best clothes and stand like a slave waiting to be purchased. “This is Shane, he’s seven years old. This is Shane, he’s nine. This is Shane, he’s twelve.”

All the rejection, all the rage— Pop had seen me through it with his crinkly smile, the weird seventies surfer lingo, the sunrise surf patrols. “Shane, there’s a place for you. You have to be patient.” All these years later, it turned out he was right.

But once I’d survived it, I’d turned my back on him. I’d moved on. It was too painful to go back there and revisit that part of my life, so I hadn’t. I’d left Pop behind as surely as if I’d thrown him from a moving car.

The memory made me feel small as I stood in our bedroom scattered with Alexa’s colorful clothing. I’d been getting ready to run off to paradise but had just been pulled back with one sentence from a woman I didn’t know.

“Dead?” I finally managed to say.

“Suicide. He went into his backyard yesterday and blew his head off with a shotgun.”

Diamond Peterson was talking softly, trying to mute the devastating news with gentle tonality. It wasn’t working. I knew from years of police work in homicide that there is no good way to deliver this kind of information.

My stomach did a turn. I felt my spirits plunge.

“I’ve been meaning to stop by and see him,” I said. It was, of course, completely off the point and pretty much a huge lie. “He left a note in his desk,” she said. “It was written a week before he died. He wanted you to be one of his pallbearers.”

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.”

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