

The Pallbearers by Stephen J. Cannell

CHAPTER 4

The church looked like it belonged in Mexico. It was white stucco, small, and almost exactly square. It had an old-fashioned steeple with three bells. Ropes attached to the clappers hung down the front face of the building so the bells could be rung by people standing on the ground. A primitive system.

There were about forty surfboards leaning against the outside walls, a silent tribute to Walt from a bunch of long-haired, toes-on-the-nose mourners. Hibiscus and jasmine grew wild in a field overlooking the ocean and choked the little stone path that led up from the dirt parking lot.

The view was spectacular, sitting right on top of Point Dume, just off Cliffside Drive, overlooking the ocean almost a thousand feet below. The three-foot incoming swells were diminished by the height where we stood and from up here looked like tiny ripples heading toward shore. The setting was quaint and beautiful. A perfect place to say good-bye.

I pulled in next to one of several Huntington House vans. There were already about thirty or forty cars, all shapes and sizes parked in the lot—some clunkers, a few pricey models, and a scattering of rusting surf wagons.

Alexa and I got out. I was wearing a black suit and sunglasses. My face felt hot in the afternoon sun. I moved slowly as we walked toward the church and a very dark, African-American woman who appeared to be about twenty-five. She was big-boned—large, but not fat—and wore a black dress with padded shoulders. She had a friendly, if unremarkable, face. As I approached, she put out her hand and flashed a bright smile.

“I’m Diamond,” she said. “Hope you’re either Shane or Jack.”

“I’m Shane.” We shook hands. “This is my wife, Alexa.”

“Nice to meet you. If that’s the right thing to say under such terrible circumstances.”

It was always like that at funerals. Even common pleasantries seemed out of place.

“We’re having a pre-service pallbearers’ meeting in the rectory building over there beside the church. There’s only one who hasn’t showed yet. Hope he doesn’t duck out.”

“Who’s missing?” I asked, thinking maybe it was someone from my days there.

“Jack Straw. He’s coming from Long Beach. Do you know him?” I shook my head. “I don’t know him either, but like all of us, he once lived at Huntington House and was on Walt’s list. He said over the phone that his boss wouldn’t let him off ’til noon.” She frowned at her watch. “He should have been here by now.”

“I’ll just go on into the rectory and introduce myself,” I said.

“Good. I’ll be there as soon as this guy Straw shows.”

Just then a shiny, red-and-black, custom Softail Harley came roaring up the hill, pipes blaring. I could tell from the deep growling sound that the engine was a big V-twin. Astride the brightly painted bike, arms outstretched to clutch shoulderwide ape hangers, was a young guy with no helmet, long black hair, dirty jeans, and leathers. Not what I’d choose to wear to a funeral, but Huntington House wasn’t exactly an Eastern finishing school, so you had to be ready for anything.

The rider pulled to a stop in the parking lot, put down a foot, shut off the bike, and racked the kickstand. Then he climbed off and walked up the path toward us.

“Jack Straw. Sorry I’m so late,” he said, addressing Ms. Peterson.

“You look pissed, so you must be Diamond.”

She looked at his outfit then flicked her gaze at me. “That’s what you’re planning on wearing?”

“All I got, Toots.” When he smiled, he showed us one gold- boxed tooth in front.

I’m a cop. My job is to read people, and from jump this guy was coming off as dirt. He had a career criminal vibe. If I ran him through the system, I was sure his package would contain a fat list of priors. At least, that was my instant take. He was twenty- eight or thirty and handsome in a greasy, Tommy Lee way. His attitude suggested he thought he was pretty damn hot.

Then he took off his heavy leather biker jacket. Underneath, he had on a white tank. Tattoos covered both arms and confirmed my suspicions— spiderwebs at each elbow, crude drawings, and the names of old girlfriends written on both forearms. A walking billboard. It was mostly prison work, done in that hard- to- miss, strange, greenblue ink that the California penal system uses.

He turned and looked me up and down.

“You a cop?” he asked, making me as quickly as I had just made him. Cops and cons can do that.

“Yeah, but I’m only here as a friend of Walter Dix,” I said coldly. “I won’t tell your P.O. you skipped out of work early.”

“Hey, come on. Don’t bake me, dude. I just asked.” Then he put his hand out to me, and since I had no choice, I shook it. He turned back to face Diamond.

“I work at a motorcycle shop in Long Beach. My boss is a dick and made me finish a ring job I was doing on a fl at head Harley.” He looked over at Alexa.

“This is my wife, Alexa,” I said. He held his appraisal for a few seconds too long. A frank sexual inventory. He’d made me as a cop quickly, but seemed to have missed the fact that, besides being gorgeous,

underneath her simple black sheath Alexa was also LAPD blue. I watched as he mentally undressed her. If Mr. Straw didn't cut it out, he was soon going to be keeping that boxed tooth in a tooth box.

"Let's go inside. We need to pick our spots," Diamond said. "Mrs. Scully, you can wait inside the church. It's starting to fill up, so you better get a seat."

Alexa nodded and moved toward the little chapel. I followed Diamond Peterson and Jack Straw into the small rectory beside the church. Three other people were waiting. Apparently, there were just going to be the standard six pallbearers.

It was a strange bunch, all veterans of the group home. We were all dressed differently, and all of us were from different time periods at Huntington House.

The oldest was a stocky Hispanic man in his early fifties with a low forehead and a full head of thick black hair, silvering at the temples. He must have been from Walt's early years at the home in the late sixties. He was wearing an inexpensive off-the-rack black suit. His knuckles were scarred and looked like long ago he'd had old gang tattoos removed. They were big bony hands that could hurt you.

He introduced himself as Sabas Vargas and said he was an attorney in East L.A. My guess from the scraped knuckles and the hardline set of his mouth was that his practice in the barrio probably involved getting vato killers their prison walking papers.

Standing next to him was a woman in her mid- to- late thirties. Trim body, short hair, conservative print dress. She was very mannered, tightly wrapped, and efficient looking. Her name was Victoria Lavicki. Diamond made the introductions and said that Victoria was a CPA with the well-known downtown accounting firm of Kinney and Glass. From her approximate age, I figured we'd probably just missed each other at the home. She said she'd been at Huntington House for six years in the eighties, which was a long stay, but I still held the record.

The last introduction was Seriana Cotton, an imposing specimen about six feet tall and twenty- three years old. She was African American and wore an Army corporal's dress uniform with a row of combat ribbons. The uniform patch on her shoulder identified her as a soldier in the Third Armed Cavalry Division. Seriana was physically fit and had a no- nonsense demeanor. She was one of those rare women who could accurately be described as handsome. Corporal Cotton did not smile as she met us but said that she was about to return to Iraq for her second tour.

“Okay,” Diamond said. “We’ll put the men on three of the four corners because that’s where the weight is. I need one woman to take the last corner. You look like the best bet, Corporal,” she said, smiling at Seriana Cotton.

“I’m good for it, ma’am,” Seriana replied.

“Victoria and I will take the middle.”

I didn’t know who put Diamond Peterson in charge, but she was organized, so no one was complaining.

“You can decide who takes the front and who gets the back, but let’s do it now because the service needs to start. Once it’s over, the hearse will be waiting out front. Carry the casket out the door and the driver will instruct you on how best to slide it into the hearse. He told me there’s rollers in the back to help get it inside.”

We spent a minute lining up in our correct places, around an imaginary coffin, then nodded to each other. We were ready.

It was strange looking into their faces. All of them had started right where I had, all had come out someplace completely different.

Six graduates of Huntington House. Pop’s favorites.

Or at least that’s what I thought at the time, even though I couldn’t understand why he’d picked me. Why else, I reasoned, would he have wanted the six of us to carry his coffin?

The Pallbearers. Copyright © 2010 By Stephen J. Cannell