

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.”

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

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.

WHITE SISTER

"Pretty expensive over there," I said. "You got the cash?" I asked.

"No. But you do," he said.

"I'm not gonna buy you a month in a hotel!"

"Lookit this!" he said, holding up his plastered wrist. "This be my green and gold lifetime pass. Green for da money, gold for da honey. This here's gonna cost you. I can't be scuffling for quarters with no broken wrist."

"You were jaywalking, stop trying to shake me down!" I was running out of patience.

"I'm going to the Legal Aid!" he shrieked. "Gonna hire me a kick-ass-get-some-money street lawyer. Got some big-time pay-back comin'."

I needed this guy out of my life without a lawsuit, and I figured if a hundred and ninety bucks did it, then it was probably a good buy. "Okay. I'll give you the money," I finally said. "But that's it between us. After that, we're done."

"Righteous." He grinned.

The Southern was an old, five-story hotel. The brick front, which had not yet been sand-blasted, was still stained brown from eighty years of L.A. smog. But the interior was renovated, the marble in the lobby and the open balconies that ran down the long hallways had been repaired. Fifty-five rooms overlooked a large square atrium. I'd been inside a few times in the past, to make drug arrests. Now, with the renovation and the new management, it was a favored spot on the Row.

When I pulled up in front, five homeless men were sitting on the steps. As Jonathan got out of my car, they all popped up like they were shot from air rams.

"It's Long Gone John," a big red-faced guy with a beard yelled. "He stole my radio! Get him!"

Bodine turned to face them. "You leave me be, Tuck. This here's the po-lice." He waved an arm at me, but one of the men threw a beer bottle in our direction. It broke on the pavement behind us.

"Get outta here, you jack-rollin' piece of shit!" a third man yelled.

Then they all started advancing on us.

"Git this pile a bolts moving," the Crown Prince of Bassaland commanded as he ducked back into the car.

They were throwing bottles, and since I didn't want to get hit or scratch the paint on my new silver Acura, I ignored my required police response to a felony 415, jumped back behind the wheel and sped off up the street.

The same thing happened at the Simone and the Union Rescue Mission. The minute anybody saw Jonathan Bodine, they started throwing stuff. In five minutes, he got two death threats and several promises of permanent injury.

"They really love you down here, John," I said, wondering how I was going to unload him. "You also a typhoid carrier or something?"

"I'm having some temporary problems with these lie-like-a-crack-whore half-steppers," he grumbled. "Get over it."

"Everybody's calling you a jack-roller. Does that mean my trunk's full of other people's property?"

"I ain't gettin' outta this car till you find me a squat spot with windas," he said, crossing his arms and slumping defiantly in the seat.

I tried twice more to unload him, once at the Weingart Center and once in the park. Both times it was like the last reel of a zombie movie. Guys in rotting overcoats lurched toward us growling. Throughout this miserable experience, I continued to call Alexa on her cell and at home, but voice mail kept picking up.

I don't know what moved me to take him home with me. Probably guilt for running him down, or maybe a deep-seated feeling that I was still legally responsible, but mostly, I think it was because I was tired of screwing around with him and wanted to get home because of a growing concern over Alexa.

"I hate Venice," he said, as we drove down Abbot Kinney Boulevard. "Nothing but panhandlers and such on that beach."

He sort of had a point. The current wisdom on L.A.'s homeless was that panhandlers went to the beach, either Santa Monica or Venice. Teenage runaways ended up in Hollywood, and only the most desperate down-and-outers like John lived in boxes, Alices, or doorways on the Row.

WHITE SISTER

"I'm gonna take you home with me," I finally admitted. "You get one night in my garage, then we'll figure out what to do with you in the morning."

"I ain't sleepin' in no garage," he complained, pulling at his shirt. "This here look like a Texaco uniform?"

"It's okay. I'll put a cardboard box in there so you'll be more comfortable."

"You run a man down, don't say shit, or I'm sorry. Then you insults me and makes me sleep in some cold-ass garage 'stead a one a them sweet SROs."

I took him home, thinking this may be the dumbest move in my entire police career. As we pulled into the driveway in front of my Venice Canal house I immediately saw that Alexa's car wasn't there. It was now almost nine-thirty. I wondered if maybe she had gone to the market and had left me a note inside.

As we got out of the car, Jonathan Bodine looked around despairingly. "I spent a month down here once. It sucks. Got rats by this canal big as fuckin' meat loaf."

I let it go, went to the front door, unlocked it, and walked into the entry hall. There was no note from Alexa on the floor by the door where we always left them. All the lights were out. I started flipping switches.

Jonathan Bodine wandered in behind me. "Man, talk about four walls and a chair."

Here was this guy who lived in a cardboard box, standing in my living room, dissing my classic canal house. I swallowed my irritation and said, "There's a shower in my son's room. Come on." I led him through the summer heat of the house and turned on the central air. I could already smell him and didn't want that stink to get caught in the curtains.

I turned on the lights in Chooch's bedroom. It was empty because my son was beginning his freshman year at USC on a football scholarship. His girlfriend, Delfina, who had come to live with us after her cousin died, was visiting relatives in Mexico and wasn't due back till the end of the summer. The house felt empty. Jonathan Bodine moved up and stood in the doorway behind me.

"You'll sleep in here," I told him.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

"Thought you said it was a garage."

"It was. We converted it into a room for my son. The shower's in there. Take off those clothes. I'll wash them and send that coat to the cleaners."

"Now you finally talkin'," he grinned.

He peeled off the coat and started to unbutton his shirt, kicked off his soiled boots, then dropped his trousers and stood there in his skivvies. Without his clothes, he seemed even skinnier than before. He had light coffee-colored skin peeking out from under a layer of street grime. Some kind of African tribal tattoo wrapped his small bicep. He walked toward the bathroom wearing only his boxers, which were yellowed with age, or urine. God knows what.

"Kick the boxers out through the door. There's shampoo and soap in the shower."

He nodded and started inside.

"And Bodine . . . if you think you're gonna steal anything out of this house, remember I'm a cop and I make my living shooting people."

"Already run me down. Might as well shoot me, too."

He slammed the door. A minute later I heard the shower running.

I turned around and saw Franco, our adopted marmalade cat, standing behind me sniffing the air like somebody had farted. His yellow eyes were packed with distrust and his ears were back, giving me attitude. His look said, "Why on earth did you bring that home?" Good question.

I went through Chooch's dresser and found a red Harvard-Westlake sweatshirt, jeans, a belt, some clean underwear, and socks. I put them on the floor outside the bathroom door, picked up Bodine's dirty clothes, and carried them out to the laundry porch. I loaded the washer and turned it on, all the while wondering where the hell Alexa was.

I tried calling her cell, but again it went straight to voice mail. I gave Franco fresh water and filled his dish with dried food.

Then the phone in the living room rang.