

THE PROMISE

THE CRIME SCENE was on Oro Vista Boulevard. Shane's badge was still in Captain Haley's safe, but he knew one of the blues guarding the chain-link gate that fronted an avocado orchard. It displayed a sign identifying it as Rancho Fuente del Sol.

He drove up the lane to a spot where the police crime-scene vehicles were parked. The makeshift dirt parking lot was within sight of Tujunga Canyon Road, which ran just north of Oro Vista in Sunland. Shane got out and locked the Acura. He walked around the front of the crime tech's van and coroner's wagon, past the three slick-backs—black-and-white detective cars without roof lights. As he glanced across Tujunga, a carload of black teenagers wearing blue headbands drove by. The car was a BMW four-door full of gangsters who stared across the street at the avocado grove, creeping along in the right lane for a block before speeding up. The car looked to Shane like a Crip mothership—a gang leader with his bodyguards. Shane waited. A few moments later, he saw another car, a primed Ford Fairlane work car with two bangers in

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

the front seat, both heavily federated, wearing their colors—blood red. They also slowed and looked the crime scene over before speeding up and passing on. Shane watched for five more minutes as two more motherships and half a dozen work cars drove by.

These were not curious African Americans from Sunland High. They were Crips and Bloods from South Central who had heard about Stone's death, and were out there cruising the crime scene. Shane didn't like the feel of it. Any moment, these rival sets could open up on each other. It seemed strange they hadn't done it already.

As Shane watched, a car full of Crip bangers parked across the street. One of the teenagers got out wearing a blue-hooded sweat-shirt with the sleeves ripped off. His muscles glistened in the overhead xenon street lighting. Even at this distance, Shane could read the angry scowl.

Shane made his way down a marked trail between a row of trees, and finally came to an opening where the lab techs were still working. It was a dirty, disorganized crime scene. Not so much because of Stone's blood, which had dried and looked black in the moonlight, but because the shooters hadn't bothered to "police" their brass, or scuff out their footprints. The forensics team was marking, bagging, and photographing the hundred or more shell casings, then logging them into evidence. The hope was that there would be a fingerprint on one of the casings. Of course, the chance of this happening was less than one percent, because the rule was that anybody who didn't pick up their brass had probably worn gloves when loading clips. The shooters were teenagers, but they were very savvy in the art of murder.

The lab would also study the casings for tool marks—the tiny scratches and indentations left by the breech as it fired and ejected the casings. Tool marks were specific to each weapon and could be used to identify the firearm if it was ever recovered. They were also pouring plaster of paris into the footprints, making molds and marking each one.

Alexa was near the body as the coroner's assistant started to roll him. Shane approached and stood silently behind her, looking down at the dead African-American gang leader as he was flopped

HOLLYWOOD TOUGH

over. His face and chest looked like meat salad, shredded and destroyed by the high-powered ordnance that had poured into him at close range. Stone had been a big man, six-five and over three hundred pounds. He had made a large target and most of the hits were above the waist. The body's surface blood was dried and the limbs flopped lifelessly, indicating that rigor mortis had already come and gone—something that takes at least six hours. Second-generation maggots were nesting on and under the body. A maggot generation was usually around eight hours. Because of these two factors, Shane judged the murder to be between six and sixteen hours old. Despite his size, the vic had been blown right out of his expensive yellow crocs . . . crocodile shoes were a gang status symbol in the 'hood.

Near the body was a cardboard sign, the message written in large block letters. It was just being bagged by the CSIs.

"Snitches get stitches and end up in ditches," Shane read the sign softly, and Alexa, who had not heard him come up behind her, turned and saw him.

"Hi," she said.

"They weren't kidding around, were they?" he said, still looking at the mutilated body. "Put enough lead in him to open a strip mine."

"So far, over a hundred rounds counted—that's five banana clips, at least."

"If you try to shoot at the king, it's imperative you don't miss," Shane observed, then added, "You got a buncha 'hood-rats cruising by on Tujunga. I spotted a lotta work cars and a few motherships."

"Yeah, it's been like that since I got here. If this is Stone, it's a big one. It's gonna change everything in South Central."

Then one of the lab techs came up and stood beside Alexa. He was a Japanese guy named Daniel Katsumota. Shane had dealt with him a few times over the years—a good scientist.

"We're gonna pull him outta here, Lou, unless your people want to take any last pictures."

"Check with Ben and Al first, but I think we're finished. Thanks," Alexa said, and they started to load the body onto the gurney.

"I can get out of here now," she said to Shane.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

He waited while she went to talk to the two homicide dicks who had caught the squeal and were now the primaries on Stone's murder. Then Shane and Alexa walked back down the row of trees to the makeshift police parking area. Across the street was another mothership—a Lincoln Town Car with at least five guys inside.

"Doesn't look good," he said.

They got into the Acura and pulled out of the grove heading back to the 210. It would be a long ride, picking their way from freeway to freeway, all the way to Venice Beach.

"That guy sure looked like Stone. He's the right size," Shane said to break the tension in the car. Alexa seemed worried, and had fallen into a thoughtful silence.

"We can't make a final I.D. until we get his dental records," she said. "But his wallet was in his pocket and the CRASH unit had pictures of him from an old arrest . . . same death's-head ring, same neck jewelry, same tats. It's Stone."

"Wonder who got him?"

"Bloods . . . had to be. But somebody close to him probably set him up. He was too careful to get ambushed. That's why he lasted so long."

"Right," Shane said, "so that means a full gang war between the Crips and the Bloods to control his drug turf."

"I've got the CRASH unit on a twenty-four, twenty-four," she said. That was twenty-four hours on, twenty-four hours off. It basically added a third more manpower to the street without increasing personnel, but it burned out the troops, so it was only stopgap at best. "I'm upping patrol units in the heavy Crip and Blood territories, the Sixties and One Twenty-nine South, where Stone's Front Street Crips hang. I've got the Hoover Street brands covered, but it's such a large area, it's almost hopeless."

"Yeah . . ."

More silence. Then like a beautiful setter coming out of a deep lake, Alexa pulled herself up from her funk, shook the water off, and fixed a smile on her face.

"So how was the rest of the party?"

"Good," Shane said, keeping his eyes on the road.

HOLLYWOOD TOUGH

"Were Nora and Farrell upset I left early?"

"Uh-oh, gee, I don't think so. . . ."

"Gee, you don't think so?" She was looking at him now, scrutinizing, already smelling a rat.

"What I mean is, they were so busy with their Hollywood friends, it was hard to tell."

"Shane, what happened? Did you do something?"

"Did I do something? Not much, really, unless you count knocking Michael Douglas into the pool and grabbing Catherine Zeta-Jones, tying her to the pool chair with my belt, and taking my pleasure with her. Everybody seemed to think it was good fun," he joked.

"Don't dodge. What happened? Something happened."

How she could do that still mystified him. What on earth had he said that had tipped her? He hadn't even been looking at her. She'd done it off one sentence and some body language. No wonder she'd been such a great detective.

"Well, something sorta happened at the end, while I was getting out of there."

"What?" She had turned to face him now, staring at him in the driver's seat of the Acura, face lit only by passing freeway signs.

"I want to know. Please, Shane, Nora is very important to me."

"Well, on my way out, I was going through the pool house and some guests were in there smoking Cohibas."

"Oh, my God. You didn't bust them for having contraband cigars?"

"Do I look like a drooling idiot?"

"Okay, go on."

"They didn't know I was there, then some guy asked Farrell if he was getting Nora to sign a prenup. And Farrell said he didn't have to . . . that he'd had two wives already, and when he got tired of them, they both conveniently died of food poisoning."

She sat there and looked at him. He didn't have the nerve to return her gaze, so he kept his eyes front and center, carefully navigating the transition onto the 110.

"That's it?" Alexa asked.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

"Yep. That's it. Except when he saw me standing in the back of the room, he got all froggy. Told me it was just a joke, not to get my handcuffs out."

"That's what it was, a joke. He hasn't had any ex-wives. He's never been married before."

"You sure?"

"That's what Nora said."

"Well, then we've got nothing to worry about."

"Honey, it was just a joke."

"A bad joke. It didn't go over too well, even with his Cohiba-smoking buddies."

"Shane, don't mess around and start looking into this. . . ."

"Think I got too much spare time on my hands?"

She didn't answer, but she was scowling.

"No. Come on . . . It just hit me kinda funny is all. But I'm going back on duty in two days and I've put in for Special Crimes, so if I get it, I'm gonna be real busy. No time to go digging up bodies in Farrell's backyard."

"It was just a joke. Say it. Say: Alexa, it was just a joke."

"I thought it was a murder confession, but I get easily confused . . . so you're probably right."

"Say it."

" 'Alexa, it was just a joke.' "

"And you'll forget it?" she asked. "Promise."

"Already forgotten," he answered.

When they got home, Chooch was in his room. He heard the garage door close and came out carrying a sheaf of papers with a pencil between his teeth.

"Geez, I'm glad you guys are back. I gotta get this essay out by Friday. It's a first draft for my college application essay, and I need a copy editor."

Looking at Chooch standing in the living room of their little Venice canal house, Shane couldn't help but feel a flash of extreme parental pride. The boy had been a surprise, coming along late in his life. The fifteen-year-old arrived as a houseguest two years ago, sent by an old lover and police informant named Sandy Sandoval.

HOLLYWOOD TOUGH

Sandy had told Shane that her Hispanic son was getting into trouble, and had been hanging with some EME gangbangers in the Valley. She said the teenager needed a male role model and she had picked Shane for the job. But Sandy was killed during the Molar case—died in Shane's arms—and her last sentence revealed to Shane that Chooch was his son. A love child he'd never known he'd had. The Molar case turned into a huge police corruption scandal involving Shane's old partner. Alexa had been part of the case, which ended in a gunfight up in Lake Arrowhead.

After Shane and Alexa had healed from the wounds inflicted during that shootout, they took Chooch in. A blood test confirmed that Sandy was telling the truth. Shane was Chooch's father. A relationship that had started out as troubled had blossomed into one that Shane treasured as much as the one he now shared with Alexa. He looked at his son, who was six feet three, with Sandy's Hispanic good looks and Shane's deep sense of honor and thought: a handsome, athletic specimen with the heart and head of a champion.

Chooch was a junior at Harvard Westlake prep school in the Valley and he'd already been contacted by Joe Paterno, with the offer of a football scholarship to Penn State. They wanted to switch him from quarterback to strong safety, but Chooch wanted to keep his old position, so he was still talking to coaches at three other universities.

"Listen, Alexa, could you take a look at this college essay and tell me what you think?" Chooch asked. Harvard Westlake had students do a first draft in their junior year. These all-important essays had to be completed and sent by Christmas of their senior year.

"I'll do it," Shane volunteered. But when Chooch looked over at him, he seemed puzzled, and hesitant.

"Alexa's a better speller," he hedged.

"Don't you want me to read it?" Shane asked, feeling hurt.

"Maybe later," he said, and handed the paper to Alexa.

Shane was not going to beg. He got a beer, then went out back to sit on one of the metal lawn chairs and look at the windblown

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

waters of the Venice canal. The moon was hanging low on the horizon. The water rippled in its silver glow. He never tired of the view.

Venice, California, had been plopped down one block from the ocean in 1928, designed by an architectural dreamer named Abbott Kinney, and fashioned after a scaled-down version of Venice, Italy. The canal blocks had fallen into a state of disrepair in the seventies, but there was an old-world charm to them, as if a dreamer's vision might still be able to catch hold in this high-tech microchip world and cling to life, refusing to be banished, no matter how out of place and ill conceived. The four canal blocks of Venice, where Shane lived, were the remnants of that kind of stubborn dream. Corny plastic gondolas growing moss at the waterlines floated at docks; Old World bridges arched over narrow seawater channels only three feet deep.

The Venice canals squatted in defiance, just a stone's throw away from strip malls and steel-and-glass medical buildings. It took a stubborn heart to be so different and unrepentant.

Shane was sitting there, pondering Venice and his day—the death of Kevin Cordell and the rediscovery of Nicky Marcella. He was also trying with all his heart to live up to his promise to Alexa and not think about Farrell's bad joke.

Then she came out and sat on the chair next to him. She seemed pensive.

"What's wrong? You okay?"

"Yeah . . . It's just Chooch's essay," she said.

"Really? What's it about?"

"You'll have to get him to tell you."

Now Shane was a little angry. Why were they hiding it from him? But he was determined not to pester her or Chooch about it. If they didn't want to share it with him, so be it. He was still staring out at the rippling water when she spoke.

"Listen, baby, I was a little taken aback when you said you were putting in for Special Crimes."

"Really?"

"Yeah. That unit reports to me, and it gets some pretty hairy assignments. I was sort of hoping to make a case for your going

HOLLYWOOD TOUGH

to Internal Affairs. You know, the sixth floor at Parker Center has a thing for ex-IAD advocates. It's the fast track to the top of the department. I could get you a shot down there."

Shane kept his eyes fixed on the canal, watching a mallard duck glide across the surface, thinking, right now, that he was just like that duck: his emotions paddling like crazy beneath the water, but on the surface, calm, showing nothing. He didn't want Internal Affairs, even though he knew Alexa was right about it being the quick way into administration, but he didn't want that either. He wasn't cut out to be a manager. He was a street cop, a field man.

"I . . . I think my cowboy days aren't quite behind me yet," he finally said.

"I know . . ." She leaned over, took his hand and squeezed it. "That's what I'm so worried about. It's your decision, of course, but maybe the time has come to stop playing cops and robbers."

He looked over at her and smiled. "Is that what I'm doing? Playing cops and robbers? I thought I was policing the city, defending the innocent, protecting and serving."

"Okay. You want the real reason?"

"Might help."

"I'm worried about your safety. When you get into the field, you take too many chances. You expose yourself. You're not too risk-averse. You've already got more holes in you than a shooting range cutout. I couldn't stand to lose you."

He didn't answer her, but her concern touched him. He took her hand and led her into their bedroom. They could hear Chooch's radio playing rap. Shane took Alexa into his arms and they embraced at the foot of the bed. As he kissed his beautiful wife, Shane felt a longing surge over him. They pulled their clothes off and found each other under the cool sheets. The air conditioner in the window clattered, spilling cold air across them. Some ducks started quacking in the canal outside as Shane and his wife wrapped themselves around each other.

"Forget what I just said," she whispered. "I was being selfish. You go to Special Crimes if that's what you want."

"Honey, I won't let anything happen to this family. I promise."

They made love. He entered her and slowly they both came to

STEPHEN J. CANNELL

climax, clutching each other, moaning in ecstasy until finally, in love and passion, they achieved total unity. In the midst of sexual climax, they completely lost their sense of self and merged into one.

When it was over and they were lying in each other's arms, Shane could feel her steady breathing, feel the warmth, the softened curves of her.

She suddenly separated and faced him. "You *promise?*" she said.

He didn't know for a minute what she was talking about. Then he realized they were back on Farrell. "Oh, that? Yeah, sure," he said, and kissed her. They lay facing each other, smiling in each other's arms.

But dammit, he thought, she hadn't seen the look in Farrell Champion's eyes.