

FINAL VICTIM

Also by Stephen J. Cannell

THE PLAN

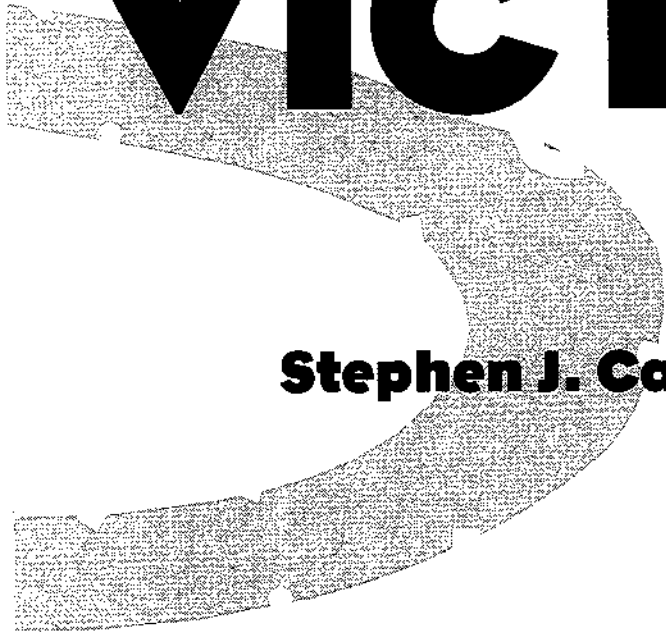


FINAL

A N O V E L



VICTIM



Stephen J. Cannell

William Morrow and Company, Inc.
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**FOR MY BEST FRIEND.
MY FATHER,
JOSEPH K. CANNELL.**

THE RAT

His mother, Shirley, had transformed him into The Rat. When he was bad or woke up with an erection, she would take him into the basement and light the Trinity candles she got from church. She would hold his hand in the flame until his flesh burned. Fire would cleanse him, she said . . . and, for a while, it did. When he was The Rat, he was pitiful and ugly, but he knew everything. The smallest details were vivid and sharp. His skin never irritated him when he was The Rat, except for the last few days before he transformed, when his nipples and skin burned, but he didn't have to wear silk. When he was The Rat he never got erections.

When he was The Wind Minstrel, he was always ready to be erect. The strange thing was, those erections were pure. He would swell with penile holiness. He was glorious, but he was always in pain. He could smell his flesh burning and everything was too bright. He had to wear specially made dark glasses and rub on Vaseline. Sometimes he got a

bad rash. . . . He tried not to think of it, to soar above it, but the stinging sensation on his skin always intensified through Friday, and by Saturday it burned like acid.

The Wind Minstrel was a minister of sorts . . . a God of Cleansing who synchronized the period of proclamation with the message of Revelation. He was in his time of Investigative Judgment. First with the dead and second, much later, with the living. Investigative Judgment determined who, of the multitudes, should be sleeping in the dust and who were worthy of transformation. The Wind Minstrel could always tell. He could pick them.

The Wind Minstrel lived at night because he could hide from God in the dark. He was a paradox: a God and a Devil. He was Christ and Anti-Christ. He and only he could possess. He walked on a plane of ritual dedication, and when he killed, he was emotionally naked and alone. It was only then that his skin stopped burning. It was only then that he could take off the dark glasses. For a while, perhaps only an hour or two, he would feel as he guessed other men might feel, but then he would transform into The Rat again, or sometimes he'd become Leonard and would lose all sense of physical power.

Leonard was a genius and worked in a computer store, but he was also pitiful, awkward and afraid. Leonard almost never spoke to anyone. The Wind Minstrel was god of the planet, but The Rat ruled cyberspace.

The woman The Rat was coveting worked for Cavanaugh and Cunningham in Atlanta. The firm traded on the international currency markets and she monitored foreign currencies, so she came to work at 4:30 P.M. and worked all night. The office building was deserted, except for a withered security guard who rarely got up from behind his black marble desk in the lobby. The Rat had seen pictures of her naked on his computer screen. He downloaded the file, including her application for plastic surgery, which contained her name and both her home and busi-

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ness addresses. He had everything, including the pictures, taped to the metal walls in the rusting, empty garbage barge where he did the human storage and reconstruction. He studied the walls with his heart pounding. Shots of her, naked, standing in profile, facing right and left, staring dully off. It was her arms that drew him. . . . Her arms were perfect, with long muscles and tight skin. The elbows were perfect. Then, as always happened, the coveting began, and The Rat started to withdraw as The Wind Minstrel emerged. During this period, The Rat would go to ComputerLand and do Leonard's job. Like Leonard, he never spoke to anyone unless it was absolutely necessary. The coveting increased over the next twenty-four hours, until The Rat couldn't resist it.

She lived in Atlanta and he knew he had to go to her, just like the others. He drove his dark blue Ford pickup there from Tampa, departing on Wednesday night, just as the aura of The Wind Minstrel began to grow. The Rat was leaving, The Wind Minstrel coming. It was always hard to drive when he was not fully transformed, but he knew it was necessary.

He arrived in Atlanta at five A.M. Thursday, and booked a room in the Marriott on Lee Street. He slept all day. He got up at four in the afternoon and went to her apartment building and parked across the street. The Rat immediately knew it would be impossible for The Wind Minstrel to possess there, because it was a huge horseshoe structure built around a pool. It was far too public and open. The Rat knew that he was ugly and would be remembered. He could not ask The Wind Minstrel to possess in such a public place. Then, while he waited, she came out, got into her car, and he followed and coveted her. She worked in a steel-and-glass building in Atlanta's Financial District. The building was called Hoyt Tower, which was something of a misnomer as it was only ten stories tall. He parked across the street and watched with his binoculars as she entered. At six P.M., he went inside the huge marble-

floored lobby just before it closed, carrying a box addressed to her employer, Cavanaugh and Cunningham. He walked past the security guard, past the employees hurrying out of the building. He took the elevator up to the fourth floor and waited, holding the box, as people left for the evening.

He knew he was unusual. He was almost seven feet tall, overweight, and had absolutely no hair on his body. No whiskers, no eyebrows . . . no pubic hair. There was none on his chest or under his arms. He was smooth all over, white and shiny. His body was pear-shaped, with corpulent limbs and no muscle definition. Ever since he was ten and had gotten the sickness that made all his hair fall out, his body had disgusted him.

He sat in the lobby to disguise his height. The people leaving for the night didn't pay any attention to him. He wore a baseball cap and dark glasses, and held the box in front of him on his knees.

She passed him once, never looking, on her way to the bathroom. He could smell her perfume and shuddered with pleasure.

"The Wind Minstrel is coming, and he is God," he whispered.

Ten minutes later, she returned to her desk as the rest of the employees left for the day. Cavanaugh and Cunningham had modern offices, done in off-white. Elevator music poured out of recessed speakers—sweet atmospheric molasses. He could see her through a thick glass wall that separated the lobby from her work space. She was seated in front of a computer, looking at the infinitesimal but constant price changes of foreign currencies. She was lean and strong, with shoulder-length brown hair. He knew she was twenty-six from the SurgiCyberNet medical records. His heart was slamming in his chest, a big, uncontrollable conga. His nipples burned like fire. Then suddenly, as if an invisible finger had tapped her on the shoulder, she glanced up through the glass wall and saw him sitting there. Her brown eyes shot him a look of

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disgust. A chill of sexual longing coursed through his body. His fingers convulsed, and he almost dropped the package. She got up, then moved along the glass partition toward the lobby. She had taken off her sweater, and he could see she was dressed in a sleeveless print dress. She opened the glass door and looked out at him.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm . . . I have a package for Shirley Land," he said, his voice pinched and high. It was always that way when he was coveting. He shot a sideways glance at her arms. The skin was tight around her muscles, the fibers long and firm, the elbows perfect. Only the hands were wrong. The Rat knew he couldn't use the hands.

"There's no Shirley Land in this office," she said.

"I was told to leave this for her."

"Nobody named Shirley Land works here," she said, and this time a sharpness crept into her voice.

He was staring openly at her now, especially at her arms. But The Rat was only allowed to covet. Only when he was completely transformed could he possess.

"You'll have to leave," she said, taking a hesitant step backward.

"You should cover your arms."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The true believer should recognize the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, should clothe the body in modest and dignified apparel." He said it singsongy, the way he had been taught . . . the way Shirley made him say it.

"Get out of here or I'm calling Security." She moved quickly into the office, closed the heavy glass door, and bolted it. They were looking at each other now through the thick glass wall, as he got up and moved slowly into the elevator. When he stood, she could see that he was huge.

He got in and pushed the Down button. The elevator descended;

after a moment, he pulled the maintenance panel open and pushed Stop, holding the car between floors. He reached for the emergency panel and removed the red telephone.

He opened the cardboard box he had brought with him and pulled out his laptop computer, connecting its modem to the elevator phone. He knew the phone was linked directly to the building security system. The elevator was stuffy from the heat of his own body. His sensitive skin stung; his nipples burned. The sweat made it worse, turning him red with an ugly rash. His cracking program began attacking the building's central computer, looking for a "hole" in the security system, firing multiple passwords he had pre-programmed into the "CrackerJack" software on his laptop. He was sure the building computer would not present much of a problem. There was nothing on that computer except programs designed to run and keep logs on the ten-story structure, so it would not be a serious security problem. Besides, The Rat was the best. Nobody could crack a computer as well as he could. At quarter past nine, his software broke through and downloaded the computer's supervisor password; then The Rat gathered all the information he would need.

By eleven o'clock, he was back in his room at the Marriott.

It took him an hour to get everything ready. He washed himself first, using a soft sponge on his sore skin. He rubbed Vaseline on until it was deep in his pores. Then, wearing a silk kimono that stuck slightly to his back, he sat on the edge of the faded bedspread. The only light was from one standing lamp, which he had draped with a bathroom towel to cut the painful glare. He put on his headset and turned on his CD player. The shrill, harsh lyrics of the Death Metal band Baby Killer wailed in his ear like the hounds of hell:

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I must breed—I have deadly needs.
Within the corpse I plant my seed.
Bitch, you are worthless, I feast on your snot,
Suck your goo, smell your rot.

He began to unpack his saw. In the center of the bed, he placed the Ten Thousand Series fixed-arbor autopsy blades. First, the round 10004 blade with the crosscut teeth. Next to it, the smaller sectioned blade. They gleamed in the low light. He unpacked the stainless-steel surgical knife handles. There were seven of them. Last was the box of carbon-steel surgical blades in their individually sealed foil packets. The glistening scalpels reflected the light and shot pain into his head, but The Rat endured it because he knew it was a sign that he was almost transformed. Soon he would be The Wind Minstrel, and The Wind Minstrel was God. The last instrument he removed was the Stryker high-speed-oscillation autopsy saw. Once a blade was selected and attached, it oscillated, cutting not by rotation but by rapid forward and backward strokes. He worked diligently until all the instruments were arranged on his bed in a pattern he liked. He studied them, and his huge body shook with agony and expectation. He pulled the kimono up with his left hand, and with his right he grabbed his evil appendage. He attempted to masturbate but was unable to obtain an erection. He was not yet transformed. Tomorrow he could swell and spew his holy seed. Tomorrow his coming would be as powerful as the resurrection of the dead. It would celebrate the destruction of the self-righteous. It would establish The Wind Minstrel's everlasting glory.