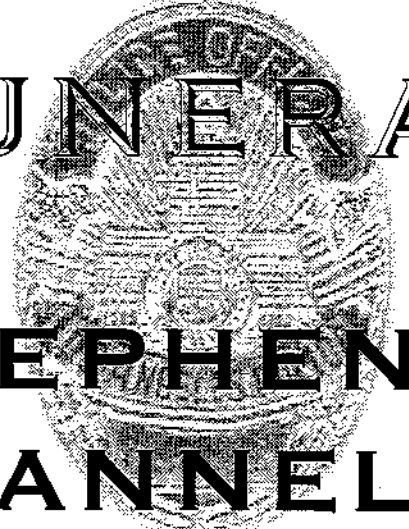


THE
VIKING
FUNERAL
STEPHEN J.
CANNELL



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DEDICATION

I was sitting having lunch in a Hollywood restaurant with my friend Bill Gately, a lean, dark-haired, intense man who often speaks in whispers. Suddenly Bill leaned forward and said, "Hey, Steve, you ever hear of the parallel market?"

Bill had recently pulled the pin after a distinguished career at the U.S. Customs Service, where he ended up as the Assistant Special Agent in charge of the Los Angeles office. The year before, he had supervised the now-famous Casablanca bank sting. In that covert operation, which was run inside Mexico, he ended up busting dozens of Mexican bankers who had been secretly laundering billions of dollars in Colombian drug money, escaping detection by wiring funds bank to bank.

In my opinion, Bill Gately is one of America's heroes. He has spent his life holding the fort against international crime syndicates, often risking his career and life, to bring dangerous criminals to justice. So naturally, when Bill talks, I listen.

I told him I had never heard of the parallel market.

What he explained to me at that lunch two years ago eventually became the basis for this novel. Without Bill, I would not have been able to write *The Viking Funeral*, because I would have been just as blind to the devastating effects of the parallel market as I'm sure the rest of you are.

While this is a work of fiction, it is based on fact. These facts have been overlooked or scrupulously hidden by our own government.

The stated reasons for this oversight defy logic.

When you read this, I hope you will become as outraged as I am.

For
WILLIAM GATELY
Friend, Colleague,
American Hero

Police officers must agree on a certain set of philosophies, because there cannot be a rule for everything.

*L.A.P.D. Management Guide
to Discipline*

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JODY

LOOKING BACK, IT was pretty strange that just the night before, they'd been talking about Jody Dean. Shane and Alexa had been in Shane's bedroom in the Venice house; Chooch was in the front room doing his homework.

Here's how it happened. . . .

It was six in the evening, and the conversation took place after they'd been making love, Shane draping his arms protectively around Alexa's narrow waist, smelling the sweet scent of her, feeling her soft rhythmic breathing on his neck. He was still inside her, both of them trying to sustain the afterglow of lovemaking for as long as possible, staring into each other's eyes, communicating on levels much deeper than words could convey.

He'd been building up to it for months, but it was right then,

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at that particular moment, that Shane decided he would ask this incredible woman to be his wife, to share his life and help raise his son, Chooch. All he needed to do was determine the timing of the proposal. Maybe Sunday night, after the awards ceremony. But soon, because he now knew he had to add her to his life . . . to his and Chooch's.

A swift series of connect-the-dot thoughts followed, and his mind was suddenly on Jody: Jody Dean, who wouldn't be at the wedding, standing at Shane's side, as they had both once promised each other. Jody wouldn't be standing up for Shane as Shane had for him, his raucous humor making everything funnier and more exciting, pouring insight and personality over Shane's special day. "Jodyizing the deal," he would have called it. And then, tumbling over this thought, a tidal wave of sadness and loss.

Alexa was looking into his eyes and must have seen his gaze gutter and dim, because she suddenly asked him what he was thinking, and that was how his best friend's name came up the day before Shane's whole world changed.

"I was thinking about Jody," Shane said, not explaining how Jody had entered his mind during postcoital sex, when his thoughts should have been on her. She lay in his arms and nodded, maybe frowning slightly, but it was hard to tell because they were so close together. He could see only her eyes and they had not changed, still soft with love.

"Oh" was all she had said, but she shifted slightly and Shane came out of her.

"I was thinking how he would have been happy for us," Shane had tried to explain, still not confessing his real train of thought.

Alexa hadn't known Jody, not really . . . station-house war

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stories, mostly, and opinions; there was certainly no shortage of either where Jody was concerned. Jody had been assigned to the Special Investigations Section—SIS—when . . . when he . . . well . . . when he did the unthinkable.

Alexa had been running the Southwest Patrol Day Watch back then. Of course, she knew how the event had busted Shane up, how it still deeply affected him. After all, Jody had been like a brother. Jody's family had been like Shane's family. The Deans, with their wealth and position, never once made Shane feel like what he knew he was—a socially inept, unclaimed orphan from the Huntington House Group Home. They had cared about him when Shane had nobody who cared. Jody had been like a brother all through elementary school, high school, and the Marines. Actually, if you wanted to be absolutely accurate, all the way from Little League through the Police Academy.

But there was something else about Jody, something even harder to define, which Shane had often thought about but never completely understood. He had finally come to accept it simply as Jody's aura, or Jody's "mojo"—some force of personality that made his ideas seem better, his jokes funnier, his world slightly brighter. It had even been there at the very beginning, when they were only seven or eight, back at the very start, from that first day at Ryder Field, that first Pirate Little League practice.

Shane had been dropped off by the volunteer driver of the Huntington House van and had joined the team. He didn't have a father or mother to cheer him on, or a family to buy his uniform—Jody's father stood in on both counts. Jody had had a startling effect on him from that very first day. He had it on everyone, children and adults alike—almost hypnotic.

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You knew that if you did it his way, it would just be more fun, more exciting and that in the end it would come out all right, even though sometimes it didn't. Sometimes Jody's way produced disaster. But with Jody, even disaster could be an E-ticket event, where if you held on tight, you could come off the ride, adrenalized and miraculously unhurt. Shane had been Jody's best friend, right next to all that pulsing, hard-to-define excitement; ringmaster of the Jody Dean Circus. Everybody always came to Shane, trying to get him to do their commercials, to sell their ideas to Jody. Everybody knew that Jody was destined for greatness, until that August day in the police parking lot, when . . . when it . . . well . . . when the unthinkable happened.

Alexa rolled away from him and sat up on the side of the bed, cutting off that string of painful recollections. "Jody's dead, honey. He's been dead for three years." She said it softly, but there was concern in her tone, as if no good would come of this.

"I know. . . . It's just . . . I was thinking he'd be happy for us, that's all," eager to change the subject now, almost popping the question right then, to refocus the energy in the bedroom. If he had, it all probably would have come out differently. But something . . . maybe all those dark memories, stopped him.

"It's enough for me that *we're* happy for us, and that Chooch is happy."

"I know. . . ." But his voice sounded wistful and small. He knew that she was jealous and frightened of these Jody thoughts—feelings and memories that she had never been a part of, that had once led Shane to the edge of a dangerous crack in his psyche, then to his spiraling depression in the months just before they met. It was hard to explain to her what

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Jody Dean meant, what an important part of Shane's personal history he was. She couldn't understand what the loss of Jody had done to Shane and how it had changed him. Until Chooch and Alexa came into his life, he'd been ticktocking along, heading slowly but surely toward his own dark end.

Alexa got out of bed and started to dress. Her suitcase was open on the bedroom sofa, and she had already finished packing her things, getting ready to move out of Shane's house for the week that her brother was in town.

"Buddy comes in on American Airlines tomorrow morning," she said, changing the subject.

"I'll be there, ten o'clock. Then dinner at the beach at seven. I got it all down," his tone still hectored by a confusing recipe of Jody thoughts that he couldn't completely decipher, even after all these years.

She turned and looked at him. "You all right with this?" she suddenly asked, picking up on his sharp tone, but not the reason for it. He knew she wasn't talking about Jody now or picking up her brother, but rather the awards ceremony this coming Sunday afternoon. She was going to receive the LAPD Medal of Valor for a case he'd originally discovered, then ended up working on with her. He was not being recognized. Of course, during that investigation Shane had broken more rules than the West Hollywood Vice Squad. The case and Shane's misconduct had been written up in the *Los Angeles Times*—twenty-five column inches, with color photographs describing all of his transgressions. In the face of that, the department couldn't award him the medal.

During the week they worked the case, Shane had taken a confusing emotional journey from pure hatred of Alexa Hamilton to grudging respect, to finally knowing that she was the

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most special person he had ever met. The case had turned his life around. Not only had he fallen in love, but Sandy Sandoval, a beautiful police informant he had once managed, confessed just before she died that her fifteen-year-old son, Chooch, was Shane's love child. Suddenly, his life had new meaning. In the end, the mayor and the police chief had both been arrested, along with a famous Hollywood producer and a real-estate tycoon. That was why Alexa was getting the M.O.V. on Sunday and why her older brother was coming to town to watch her receive it.

"I've got to get the budget review for DSG wrapped up before the end of the week." She was talking fast now, quickly getting dressed, inserting her small, department-approved brass stud earrings while trying to switch off the dark energy of Jody Dean.

She was referring to the annual budget for the Detective Services Group, where she had just been assigned as the executive officer. Normally the XO at an Administrative Operations Bureau would be a lieutenant, but Alexa, though still a sergeant, was on the lieutenant's list, third tier. She was probably less than a month away from getting her bars.

Shane got off the bed, his thoughts of Jody Dean left drifting in the wake of this new conversation.

"I'm gonna go say good-bye to Chooch," she said as she ran her fingers through her shoulder-length black hair, then turned and snapped her suitcase shut, presenting him with her classic profile for a moment. His heart clutched. . . . *God, she is beautiful.* Then she carried the suitcase out and set it down in the hall next to the front door. A moment later Shane trailed her out of the bedroom.

Chooch was not studying for his final exams at the desk in

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the den, where he did his homework. Shane looked out the back window and saw that Alexa had already found him in the backyard, seated in a metal chair, going over a vocabulary list for tomorrow's test. Shane watched through the window as Chooch stood and Alexa reached out and took his hand. His sixteen-year-old son was tall and had his deceased mother's Hispanic good looks. The waters of the Venice, California, canals dappled late-afternoon sunlight across their features. Alexa was looking up at the six-foot-tall boy, who seemed intense and serious, nodding at whatever it was she was saying. As he watched them, he thought they seemed perfect together, standing, talking earnestly in the backyard of his little Venice canal house. He liked what he saw, what he felt—liked the sense of calm that all this laid against his once turbulent interior. Then Alexa leaned forward and kissed Chooch on the cheek, and he hugged her.

Shane's mind flipped back once again. *Too bad Jody isn't here to see this*, he thought.

Then he opened the door and went out into the yard to join them.