

# THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS

• • • **S**o COACH FRY says that they have this camp every year. It's up by San Francisco, and he says he's gonna call and find out if there's still a place. That is, if it's okay with you," Chooch said, looking over at Shane, wondering which way it was going to go. They were in Alexa's powder blue Subaru, on the way to Harvard Westlake School the next morning, the morning it happened—Friday morning.

"How long is the camp?" Shane asked.

"Coach said it's about a month. It starts next week, June seventh. After school gets out."

Shane nodded. He was worried about expenses, but Sandy's estate had left money in trust for Chooch, and part of his new

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responsibility as a parent was to provide enriching life experiences. On the other hand, he wasn't sure that the Jim Plunkett Quarterback Camp in Palo Alto, California, qualified as life enrichment. But Chooch had a great arm, and the football coach said he would probably start at quarterback his sophomore year.

Shane had spent afternoons after his therapy sessions standing on the sidelines at Zanuck Field, watching spring ball. Chooch in practice pads, his silver helmet shining in the afternoon sun, taking his five-step drop, setting up, rifling passes to streaking wideouts on long fade or post patterns. He had to admit that his son looked good, but he was hesitant to let him go, to lose him for even a few days, let alone a month. Sandy had raised him for the first fifteen years of his life, and Shane had no idea he was the boy's father. Now, after Sandy's death, Shane was Chooch's sole parent. The newness of this obligation produced a degree of anxiety. Indecision enveloped both of them, swirling around in the front seat of Alexa's car like a sandlot dust devil.

"Why don't you ask him to make a call, find out what the deal is," Shane finally compromised.

"Solid." Chooch grinned at him.

Shane had just transitioned to the 101 Freeway and edged Alexa's car into the right lane to get off at Coldwater, where Harvard Westlake School was located. Sandy had enrolled Chooch there, and Shane was now paying the tuition—more than ten thousand dollars a year—from Chooch's trust account.

"Bud," he said softly. "Not to change the subject, but I need to get your take on something."

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"The Chooch Scully Store of 'Sagacious' Advice is open," he said, using one of his new "vocab" words Shane had tested him on last night, after Alexa had left.

"I know you like Alexa. I know she's important to you, right?"

"She's the other level, man, you know that."

"Yeah," Shane said. "I was wondering . . . how would you feel about putting her into our deal, full-time?"

"You mean you're gonna knock off this light-housekeeping thing you've been doing and finally give her a long-term contract?"

"That's the idea," Shane said, smiling. "But I don't want to ask her unless you're okay with it."

"If you can get her to say yes, then get after it, dude. 'Cause you an' me won't ever do any better."

Shane smiled and looked over at Chooch, who was grinning openly.

"Okay, okay, good deal," Shane responded with relief.

Soon they were in the line of cars in front of Harvard Westlake. As they pulled up to the drop zone, Chooch grabbed his book bag from the backseat, then hesitated. "Don't screw up the proposal," he said. "Get a good ring, no zirconias. And I wanna preview the pitch. I wanna hear how you're gonna say it. You can practice on me, y'know, so you don't boot it."

"Come on, whatta I look like?"

"Like you're in over your head." Chooch grinned. "I don't want you t'blow us out on some whack move."

Shane raised his right hand and Chooch high-fived it. "Good luck on your English final," Shane said, and Chooch nodded his thanks. Then he was out of the car, still smiling as he

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walked up the path toward the classroom. He was instantly joined by two friends, both girls.

Shane pulled the Subaru back onto Coldwater, got on the 101 heading west, on his way to the 405 South. He would probably arrive at LAX an hour early to pick up Alexa's brother Bud, but Shane figured he could get some coffee at the American Airlines terminal amid the passenger rush, and plan this new part of his life. He was breezing along in the middle lane up over the hill, passing Sunset. He had his left arm on the open window, feeling the warm June air in his face, hidee-hoeing along, his mind freewheeling, when he glanced over and saw the Al Capone Ride—the lowered orange and black muscle car with a strange, thin layer of black dust all over it. The car was tracking along next to him in the fast lane. The man behind the wheel was looking straight ahead, up the freeway, his curly blond hair and short beard whipping in the slipstreaming wind.

Shane's heart actually stopped . . . like when you're about to get very lucky or very dead. The driver looked over at him.

It was Jody Dean.

They stared at each other for almost ten seconds, racing along, door handle to door handle, at sixty, sixty-five miles an hour, both of them frozen by the complicated moment.

Shane was filled with thoughts too mixed up to fully deal with, thoughts that started out as questions but boomeranged back as unbelievable dilemmas. His dead best friend was ten feet away, speeding along, staring over at him from the fast lane. Jody Dean, who had committed suicide, shooting himself in the Valley Division parking lot three years ago, leaving his fly-specked, stiffening corpse sprawled in the front seat of a

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Department L car for the shocked officers of SIS to discover. Shane's mind double-clutched, missed the shift, and redlined dangerously. How could Jody Dean be alive? It was impossible. Jody had eaten his gun, put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger, turned his brains into blood mist. Shane Scully, his best friend, his Little League catcher and soul mate, had carried the coffin, watched it go into the furnace, cried over the urn as he handed it to Jody's grieving widow. In the months that followed, before Alexa saved him, Shane had started circling the drain himself, getting closer and closer, following Jody into the same suicidal vortex.

So how could Jody be in the fast lane of the 405, driving a dirty black and orange '76 Charger, not ten feet from him? Suddenly, Jody's expression changed, became hardened with recognition and resolve. Shane's attempt at a logical explanation was unhinged by that determined look on Jody Dean's face.

You see, Shane *knew* that look. There was no mistaking it. He'd seen that look a thousand times, going all the way back to Little League. Ten-year-old Jody, on the mound staring in at nine-year-old Shane behind the plate. *That look on his face, and in his eyes, stone cut and insistent.* Shane, crouching behind the plate, clad in his catcher's gear, each sending the other thought vibes. A silent conversation nobody else could hear. *We gotta give him the rainbow curve, man . . . or give him the slider. . . .* Jody, reading these thoughts and shaking his head even before Shane's fingers flashed the sign. *Nothin' doin', Hot Sauce . . . gonna throw the heater,* he telepathed back as clear as if he had walked up and shouted it at Shane. That was what was happening right now. Jody's thoughts shooting across the painted lane dividers from the Charger's front seat, shooting a

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vibe . . . a warning, plain as if Jody had shouted it: *Forget this, man. Forget you ever saw me.* And then, some kind of goodbye: *See ya. Sorry.* . . .

Suddenly, Jody floored the dust-covered Charger, shooting ahead, changing lanes around a slow-moving truck.

“No!” Shane’s voice was a strangled plea. “Don’t go! Not again!”

Shane pushed the pedal all the way to the floor, but Alexa’s Subaru was underpowered, winding up slowly like a twenty-year-old air-raid siren, taking its time to reach full power, its thin whine lost behind the Charger’s four-barrel roar. Finally, Shane was going almost a hundred, chasing the vanishing muscle car between semis and soccer moms, businessmen and airport taxis, weaving dangerously in and out amid a chorus of blaring horns and unheard curses.

The Charger was ahead, gaining ground, its loose but empty chrome license-plate holder winking morning sunlight back at him.

Suddenly, Jody cut off a Ryder van and the top-heavy rent-a-truck, with its inexperienced driver, started pinwheeling across all four lanes. In seconds, it was directly in front of the Subaru. Shane had a scary two seconds as he tried to avoid death at a hundred miles an hour. Alexa’s car, broke loose, swapping ends. Then he was carouseling wildly down the freeway: the landscape strobing past his windshield—dangerous, disembodied glimpses of trees, guardrails, and concrete abutments. A kaleidoscope of images on spin cycle . . . Around and around the Subaru went, metal lint on the busy L.A. freeway, until he saw the end coming. A bridge abutment spun into view like a huge concrete iceberg.

Shane fed the little Japanese car some gas, trying to

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straighten out the spin. He caught some traction, and the car made a try at straightening out, but he was still crooked and sliding sideways when he hit the wall of concrete, slamming into it hard. He felt the whole right side of Alexa's car explode, as door handles, side mirrors and paint all disintegrated or flew free, followed a second later by the whole left door—all of this accompanied by the scream of tortured metal. Shane was staring at blurred concrete graffiti and tagger art grinding and strobing past the doorless opening like the scenery wheel in an eighth-grade play.

The Subaru finally shuddered to a halt, and then it was over. He was sitting in the car, stuck in the fast lane, facing the wrong way, his heart jackhammering in his chest.

Shane spun around and looked out the back window. The black and orange Charger was nowhere to be found.

Jody Dean was gone as suddenly as he had reappeared.