

Chapter Sixteen

Clearing customs would have been easier if I had not brought the pistol with me. The inspector was a fat man with a drooping mustachio. His rumpled khaki uniform was sweat stained at the collar and under the arms. He did not appear to be enjoying his job. When I declared the Glock, the examiner's eyebrows elevated visibly.

"Do you wish to keep the weapon with you, Mr. Travis, or would you prefer to check it with us until you leave the Caymans?"

"I would like to keep it. Is that a problem?"

"No, but we do have certain restrictions. You may not carry the pistol on your person. You must also declare the ammunition you are bringing in and account for all of it upon departure from our country. If you follow those rules, there will be no difficulty."

"I will certainly obey the law. You may have noticed in my papers that I'm a retired judge. I will not give you cause for worry."

Bitsy had been standing beside me through this inspection. She put her hand on my shoulder and asked, "You're not expecting trouble, are you?"

"No, not at all. I've always taken a weapon with me when I travel. It's just a habit, I guess." The one thing I didn't declare was the Glock's silencer. It was secreted in the handle of my suitcase,

After recovering our luggage from the customs people, a friendly black porter transported it with us to the taxi area. He said, in a singy Jamaican accent, "Is this your first trip to the Caymans?"

I said, "Yes. We're here on holiday."

“And where are you staying?”

“At the Grand Carib.”

“A wise choice. My brother, Alfred, is the bell captain there. I am Roger. Tell him I said to take very good care of you.”

“I will, indeed. Thanks for the help.” I tipped him a ten spot. I could tell by his expression that it was too much. I didn’t want to be remembered, and now I would be. Not a good thing. But I didn’t want Bitsy to think I was a cheapskate, either. Already, I was beginning to listen to the wrong head. You would think that by now I had my covert life down pat, but I still made simple mistakes. I sometimes got the feeling that my luck might be running out like that of a bad baseball team in the bottom of the ninth. I hoped for extra innings.

We checked into the Grand Carib. The place was awash in a sea of flowering bushes. Hibiscus with huge blooms and bougainvillea were everywhere. Bitsy loved it. At the front desk I requested adjoining rooms. I wanted to make Bitsy feel at ease about our stay. Actually, I wanted both of us to feel that way. I expected I would need some time alone to take care of business. Well, those were my thoughts at the time. Again, things seem to go off on a tangent when least expected, as I would find out later.

The hotel was a cut above, based on Caribbean standards. Air-conditioning that worked, a terrific view and a room service menu that was outstanding. I checked it for conch chowder. They had that and conch in four other formats. I love the stuff.

As luck would have it, Alfred the bell captain had already heard by phone from his brother about our impending arrival. He personally got us to our rooms and made the necessary AC checks, TV checks and towel checks, in order to qualify for a gratuity. I

was trapped, so I gave him fifteen dollars. However, it was an investment, since I thought I might be calling on him to provide some discreet information later.

Bitsy said she wanted to rest for a while, and we made arrangements to meet at six for dinner.

Alone, I pulled the slim phone book from the drawer in the nightstand and riffled the pages until I found the listings for banks. At this juncture, I was flying blind. I hadn't a clue as to which institution would best meet my requirements. I knew there would be no FDIC to cushion my fall if I made the wrong choice. I decided to make the decision, one that would involve large sums of money, by asking for a recommendation from that famous financial advisor, Alfred the bell captain. Dumber decisions have been made, I'm sure. Just ask Amelia Earhart. I called my new friend, Alfred, on the house phone.

He answered, "This is Alfred. How may I serve you?"

I said, "This is Duncan Travis. I have an unusual request. I'm hoping you can help me."

"If it is legal, I'm your man." 'Man' sounded like 'mon.'

"Well, yes, of course. I am thinking about purchasing some property here, and I wondered what bank you would recommend."

"Ah, that's easy. The Benjamin Private Bank in George Town has the very finest reputation. If I had a sum of money to deposit, I would go there." He gave me the phone number before ringing off.

Before I could dial the number, there was a knock on my door. I checked through the peephole to see if it was someone I knew. The way things were going, I half expected Joe Waldrip to show up. It was a stranger, a youngish black man in a suit and tie. Suits

and ties in the tropics generally mean trouble. I thought he might be a cop. Maybe to quiz me more about the Glock and my reasons for having it. Before I let him in, I decided to hide the pistol where it would be easily accessible if I needed it. I didn't know who in the hell that guy was. I slipped the weapon under the cushion in an armchair. Reluctantly, I opened the door.

The visitor stuck out his hand in a friendly manner, and said in an American, southern drawl, "Hello, Mr. Travis, I'm Fred Jasper from the American consulate in George Town. May I come in?"

"Sure, but I would like to see some identification, if you don't mind. You know how it is. I've read all the State Department warnings to travelers. We can't be too careful, can we?"

"Certainly. Can't say that I blame you." As he went inside his jacket with his hand, I tensed up, prepared to ... do what? Give him a karate chop? Knock him out with my powerful right cross? A boxing match with a man half my age was not my idea of an amusing pastime.

To my relief, he produced a small flat leather case, which opened to reveal that he was indeed Frederick Jasper, Cultural Attaché at the United States Embassy in Jamaica, on temporary duty with the U.S. Consulate in the Grand Caymans.

I said, "Come in, Mr. Jasper. May I offer you something from the mini bar?"

"No thanks. I really won't take much of your time. It seems you have some influential friends in the States. We received an e-mail this morning from FBI Special Agent Donald Grant asking us to look you up and to see if there is anything we might do to make your stay more enjoyable." He smiled sheepishly. "So, that's why I'm here, to let

you know that we stand ready to assist you in any way possible.” He had no clue as to who I was, but he wasn’t taking any chances. If I were truly a VIP, he wanted to be my friend.

Well, I thought, that’s that. They were on me like an evening gown on J. Edgar Hoover. I said, “It’s very kind of you to go out of your way like this, but I’m okay. This trip is strictly for pleasure. We plan to go to the turtle farm and to swim with the dolphins. Just tourist stuff.”

“Oh, I see. Agent Grant had thought you might need some help with the local banks. But if not, then I’ll be on my way.”

I said, “Thanks. If you reply to Don Grant, send him my regards.”

We shook hands and he left, happily I assumed. I retrieved the Glock and fastened it with a strip of duct tape to the bottom of the bathroom counter. It’s not true that man’s best friend is his dog. For modern men, it’s duct tape. I never leave home without it.

It was close to six so I showered and dressed in a white tee and jeans. I called Bitsy’s room. “I’m *mucho* hungry. How about some dinner?”

We walked down the outside of the hotel, past the pool and the cabana bar. The dining room was already busy. I could hear a half dozen languages melding together in a Caribbean *mélange*, pleasing to the ear but also cautionary. Two of the people I recognized had been on the plane with us, a robust German man, red-faced and verbose and a heavyweight blonde with him whom I took to be his wife. She wasn’t pretty enough to be a mistress. When we entered he nodded in my direction. Why did he do that, I thought? Does he want to speak to me? Does he have to speak to me? Am I paranoid? Perhaps all of the above.

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