



P.I. ADVENTURES

IN BELIZE

by

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FILE ONE

THE GRACIOUS AFFAIR

“Hey, Mon. How much chu weigh?”

I expected the question. In Belize, when you fly Tropic Airlines from Belize International Airport to San Pedro Town on Ambergris Caye, the Cessna 307’s require consideration for weight and balance before getting off the ground.

“200 pounds,” I reluctantly admitted.

Okay. So I was fibbing by about ten pounds. So what? I knew it didn’t make that much difference. Besides, I was surprised the pilot even asked me. Normally, I would be assigned the co-pilot seat because I was larger than the rest of the passengers.

“Chu get to ride up front wid me,” the pilot said amiably. “Chu,” he pointed to the next male passenger. “You sit behind me, and chu ot’ers, you sit where chu want.”

It took all of three minutes for the passengers to load. They were locals, so there wasn’t any baggage to worry about, and since the plane was full, there wouldn’t be a stop at the Belize Municipal Airport on the way. That meant it would be a twenty minute flight, rather than the usual half hour.

The pilot climbed in, started the six cylinder Lycoming engine, tapped on the altimeter gauge, the RPM gauge, and finally on the gyro compass, each in order, until they slowly rose to their proper indications.

I saw the same routine almost every time I made the same flight, so I was used to the vagaries and variations of the airline with their five single-engine planes comprising the fleet of aged Cessnas. I wondered if Tropic Air was ever going to hire a competent Airframe and Engine mechanic. Or maybe, if they were lucky, they could afford to buy a new plane, sometime.

The air was warm, even though the cloud cover could be described as scattered, and at fifteen hundred feet, the pilot had no trouble avoiding most of them. He knew the heading from Belize more by the shape of the shore and reef than by instruments of navigation.

The droning of the engine flooded my ears, and induced the usual nap, passing the time. I was confident I would be awakened when the pilot called Tropic San Pedro to announce his arrival.

I no more than closed my eyes when the plane made a sudden dive and bank.

“Jeesus!” the pilot shouted over the screams of the two female passengers in the rear seat. “Dat plane!”

I jumped to a straight up sitting position and looked around, trying to orient myself as the pilot fought to bring the plane out of the downward spin. My first reaction was to demand what plane he was talking about. But, I didn't have to ask. I could see a Douglas DC-3 in a powered descent less than one hundred feet in front of our former flight path. It was heading from the open Caribbean for the mainland, flying a descending path from above and behind without warning.

"Whoa, Nelly, bejeesus!" the pilot said with less panic than his passengers felt in the spiraling aircraft. By the third circle of the spinning plane, the pilot re-gained control, and we leveled out less than two hundred feet over the water. "Dat plane! He damn near collide us!"

Everyone seemed to hold their breath for the remaining five minutes to San Pedro, and with the airstrip in sight, the pilot headed straight for it without notifying the ground control. Which, I thought, was a dangerous act, for another Cessna 307 was sitting at the end of the strip, engine roaring, moving into the take off run.

"I comin' in now!" the pilot finally shouted into his microphone.

The other plane stopped suddenly.

"Dat chu, Manny?" the radio belched.

"Stay stopped," our pilot ordered. "I comin' in now!"

"Flight 5, Tropic Air," The control station's call came over the radio. "Do you have an emergency?"

"Yeah, Mon," the pilot responded.

"What is your emergency?"

"Hang on!" the pilot said, as he pulled the throttle back and pulled down the flaps to the 40 degree landing position.

The plane lurched forward and down. Half a minute later the pilot pulled back on the wheel, the plane flared out, hit the ground and bounced for twenty yards before settling into a landing roll.

"What is the state of your emergency?" The ground control operator requested. "Do you need assistance?"

"No, Mon!" the pilot shouted into the microphone as he guided the plane to a stop in front of the single room terminal. "I need da facilities!"

"What?"

"The ba'troom!" he responded at full voice as he yanked on the parking brake, shut off the engine, and jumped out of the plane, leaving the rest of us sitting there with our mouths agape. It took at least two minutes for us to realize everything was all right, that we were safely on the ground. We heaved a collective sigh.

The pilot returned to the plane with a sheepish grin as we piled out of it, heading for the terminal building. "Sorry 'bout dat," he said. "Dat DC-3. It most near collide wid us. It scared the well, you know, fa da me."

I joined in the laughter of the other passengers.

"Chu?" he asked me. "Chu see da numbers, any'ting, on dat DC-3? Chu in da front seat?"

I had to shake my head no. "All I saw was the wing configuration and the tail. I don't think it had any numbers, actually."

"Yeah. I be t'inkin' it may be fa da drug runnin'," he said with a shaking of the head. "No denti'cation." He turned his attentions to the plane, checking the landing struts. The landing had been a heavy one.

Belize is not the most exciting tourist spot in the world. Some people, those who take the time to look into the country, find it lacking in a great number of disciplines. The general tourists,

though, spend as little time as possible in country, and as soon as they get off the TACA, or Tan Sahsa, or Continental Airlines plane at Belize International, they head for the ticket counters of either Tropic Air or Maya Island Air to book a seat on the next flight to San Pedro Town on Ambergris Caye.

Some, depending on age and resources, might disembark on Caye Caulker, a place noted for its lazy lifestyle, lack of federal interference, and easily obtained dope, junk, pot, the stuff referred to in California as Mary Jane, tea, or by the California Health and Welfare Code number of 420.

To the American ex-patriots, and Europeans used to being cooped up in zero degree weather all winter, if not in some of their summer Months as well, it is a paradise. The tropical sun floods the entire East coast each morning, and boils the countryside by mid-day to around 100 degrees in the shade.

By mid-afternoon, its heat is ameliorated by gentle tropical breezes blowing in from the Caribbean. The problem with the country the tourism industry doesn't mention, are the tropical storms during the rainy season of June, July and August. The other problem, which they especially avoid mentioning, is the bane of the Caribbean, the tiny, almost invisible black sand flies with a bite that causes welts that can last as long as five weeks; five continuous weeks of itching torture.

I came to Belize several years ago to escape the mundane routines of the U.S. How can a private investigator have a mundane life anywhere in the U.S.? What you don't realize is that being an investigator, just like any career, requires selling your product. In an investigator's case, that means your time.

Maybe that's why so many attorney's place investigators in the same category as prostitutes; they sell their time and often provide a good screwing of the client in the end.

The comparison is an interesting one, isn't it? It's like the pot calling the kettle black.

I hated the thought of returning to the states, so after plunking down \$18,000 U.S. dollars, I bought a Belize citizenship and became one of those dual citizen ex-patriots.

It wasn't long after I settled into one of the semi-permanent hotel rooms above Gerald's Grill in San Pedro Town, that my expertise as an American style private investigator became known.

Most of the reputation was due to the provocative story telling by my good friend, David McGaughy, an ex S.A.S. officer from the British military who found more interest in his wife, Chin Lee, than in what British women offered him. The two opened the only decent Chinese restaurant in the entire country, right in San Pedro.

Perhaps my life would have been different there, had David not possessed such a glib tongue, and hadn't possessed such a penchant for stirring up excitement.

David's sense of excitement often meant baiting the British military. An excitement in which I often participated purely for the fun of it, and nothing harmful was involved.

The country of Belize, while a sovereign nation since 1981, is still protected by the British Military. They maintain a garrison and an air force contingent beside the Belize International Airport. Their favorite off duty site is the Reef Bar in San Pedro, where they gather to drink, generally raise Cain, and often challenge each other to the daunting task of running the ring.

The Reef Bar sits at the end of a thirty yard long pier into the lagoon formed by the caye and the second largest barrier reef in the world. The lagoon is relatively shallow throughout, not more than six feet deep at best.

At the rear of the bar is the notorious ring; a pool created by posts driven into the sand bottom, tight against each other, to form a circle from one corner of the bar's rear porch to the other corner. The porch overhangs the water. The circle is about forty feet in diameter, the posts protrude

from the water by no more than two feet, and inside the pool are three Sand Sharks, one Lemon Shark, one Sea Turtle, and two sting rays.

The challenge is to see who can run around the ring of post tops from one corner of the porch to the other. The one stipulation in the challenge, is that any participant had to drink no less than two pints of Belize Temple Beer, named Belikin Beer and commonly called belly-ache beer, before accepting the challenge.

The bets are heavy, and they grow heavier as the night progresses. Less than ten percent actually make the circuit without having the devil scared out of them by either falling into the pool – their exit from the water is often quicker than their fall into it – or by the hungry eyes of the sharks staring up the water's surface. No one has been lost, though.

So, you can imagine everyone's shock and dismay when the bartender cleaned out the beer bottles just before the mid-morning opening hour, and found the half of a man hanging over the posts. Half a man is an apt description, because what was once hanging in the water was no longer visible. It no longer existed.

I just came downstairs from my semi-livable apartment over Gerald's Grill, and was enjoying my first glass of orange juice, fresh squeezed and mixed with water from the local rooftop cistern, when the owner of the Reef Bar dropped in to say hello. Of course, when Constantine Constonopolous dropped by, it was never a casual call. He wasn't known as a man of cordial visits.

His opening gambit was an eye opener. "Penn. A man was found dead at my place this morning."

I wasn't sure I heard him. I squinted my confusion against the morning sun's glare reflecting off the lagoon, and eyed him for several seconds.

"You heard me. Dead! You have to find out what happened."

"Uh, why me? Manfill should handle that. After all, he is the local constabulary. Or was, the last time I spoke to him, granted that was before the recent elections. I think the UDP kept him on, even if he did support the PUP?" I grinned.

Connie, as we called him, much to his continuing disfavor, was an ardent supporter of the People's United Party, not the United Democratic Party. It was fun ribbing him.

"He couldn't handle the way out of his office. He's too drunk most of the time, and the rest of the time he's too zonked out with his pot smoking."

"I don't think the police on the main land would appreciate my interfering in a death case," I responded.

A death case was something I didn't enjoy getting mixed up in, at all. Particularly on an island as small as Ambergris Caye. I considered it would be a good way to get myself put in the same condition as the victim. 'Dead' was a pretty definitive expression of a condition I tried to avoid.

"You know the trouble with them. They won't get here for a least a week. The body won't last that long."

"You mean, your reputation as a fun place for the Brit Military won't last at all if they discover someone dead in your establishment. The OIC in Belize would place you off-limits."

He shrugged behind a dour frown, and took a breath. "Two thousand," he said at length.

"Three," I countered. "American." Damned if I was going to work a major case like this for peanuts. Even though two grand would buy a lot of peanuts, or rather Cashews, in San Pedro.

"You're trying to ruin me."

"I don't want to ruin you, or take your money at all. I don't want to even work such a case."

Three or nothing.”

I silently thanked my last benefactor for her generosity before she returned to the mainland. She was pleased with the way I handled the locating her errant son in the pot rooms of Caye Caulker, got him dried out, and put on TACA back to Los Angeles. I didn't need any more money for the time being. Besides, I was still half heartedly pursuing my efforts at getting Ritchie Skeleg to fill me in on where he found the last shipwreck that turned up several gold doubloons. Although I wasn't being too successful in that endeavor.

Connie relented. With a characteristic sigh that indicated he felt he was being reluctantly seduced with something other than words, he took a check book out of the back pocket of his Bermuda shorts. He always wore Bermuda shorts with a Guayabara shirt of matching color. He must have fifteen pairs of matching shorts and shirts.

His checks have never bounced, so I said I'd take the case.

“Tell me what happened,” I said, as I folded up the check and put it in my jeans pocket. I didn't have a pocket on the T-shirts I was known for wearing.

“Just like I said,” he explained in his German tainted English. “I came to work, and Jacks was running out of the lounge, shouting at me.”

I always appreciated the way Connie referred to his dive as a cocktail lounge. “And?”

“I told him to stop shouting and tell me what happened. He took a few minutes to calm down, then took me to the porch, and pointed at the body. It was half gone. Like the sharks got the bottom end of it hanging over the poles. It was not a pretty sight.” He closed his eyes in memory.

“What'd you do with the body?”

“Do? What could I do? I took it to David's and put it in his freezer.”

“Jesus! I bet Chin Lee loves that.”

“She's on the mainland. She left this morning and won't be back for a week. She took the kid to her mother's.”

“You never tried to find out who the dead guy was?”

He emitted another sigh with a negative shaking of his head.

“Well, I guess the best thing is to try to figure out who the dead man is. Or, was.” I got up, and left, with Connie following.

“Hey!” Gerald's wife called as she came out of the kitchen. “You're bacon's ready! Where'er you going? What'm I supposed to do with it?”

Connie and I were already around the corner of the building, kicking up sand from the street by then, so I didn't bother answering. Besides, my appetite wasn't all that great at the moment. Death had a way of making me feel that way.

“You be taking this stiff out of here now?” David greeted us as we sauntered into the kitchen of his Chinese restaurant. “Chin Lee will be killing me, don't you know?”

I did know, so I nodded.

He shrugged, and led us to the freezer. It was a large, walk in type. It was freezing in there. Actually, I guess that's what a freezer's supposed to be like, isn't it?

There was a pile on a stainless steel cutting table, with a sheet over it. He pulled back the sheet with glee. David was known for being a macabre type.

“Who would be doing a thing like this, now?” He asked.

In spite of the fact that in my profession I had seen more than my share of bodies, dead ones that is, the sight always caused a touch of revulsion until my mind focused on relevant details. “There's no blood?”

“He was bloody well hanging in the water,” David answered, letting the sheet fall, and sticking his hands in his pockets. “That’s where it all went.”

“I wonder. His pants, or what is left of them, aren’t wet.”

“That’s probably because the tide went out before we found him,” Connie put in. “I imagine the sharks got the best of him by then. Or what they could reach, anyway.”

“Any identification?” I asked, hoping David or Connie searched his pockets before I got there.

“None,” Connie said. “I’ve no idea who he is.”

“Nor I,” David chimed in. “He does have a tattoo on his fore arm, though. That should help identify him.”

“Well, judging from what’s left of him, I’d say he was probably, oh, somewhere around five foot nine inches tall, average build. About average for a white man.” I scanned him from a foot away. “No wedding ring. A sizeable cut on the back of his head. It looks like he hit his head when he fell. You have a camera?” It was a stupid question. Of course he had a camera. He wasn’t called the Computer Geek of San Pedro for nothing.

“Why?”

“I think we should at least take a picture of his face. For later identification.”

“Oh, yeah,” David agreed. He left the room and returned less than a minute later.

“That was fast,” I commented.

“I keep a camera on the serving counter in the kitchen,” he explained. “Tourists wanting pictures, you know.” He displayed the camera. “Top of the line digital, for quick printing.” Without being asked, he maneuvered around to get a shot of the man’s face.

Three minutes later, after six pictures were taken, we agreed there was nothing more to be done for the hapless victim, except wait for the police from the mainland to arrive with a boat to transport the body back to Belize City for their investigation. So, we returned to the dining room.

A few minutes later David got the pictures from his printer, and gave them to me.

“Have you ever seen this guy before?” I asked Connie as we sat, and as David retrieved three Budweiser beers from the cooler. I glanced at the beer bottles. “I thought you were a Brit,” I chided David. “Budweiser?”

“Better than Belly Ache,” he responded, opening them. “Chin Lee keeps close tabs on the Heineken. And I don’t have to be charging you blokes for these.”

“Who’s the bartender you said found him?” I asked Connie after our first sip of beer.

“Jacks,” he replied.

“He’s at work now?”

Connie glanced at his watch. “He should be. It’s after eleven.”

“I’ll have to ask him some questions,” I said, rising from the table.

Connie looked a bit pale. “Uh, why? I mean, I told you everything there is to know about his finding the body.”

I eyed him. It wasn’t normal for him to be so nervous, all of a sudden. “Sure. But there could be a lot of things he knows that he doesn’t really understand he knows.”

“Oh,” Connie said, with a sullen expression. “I suppose that’s true. Okay.” He rose from his chair.

“By myself,” I said. “It’s best if you don’t come along. I wouldn’t want him to try to hide something, or feel pressured by his boss’ presence. Know what I mean?”

Connie shrugged, and returned to his chair.

I left them there, mulling over more than a few questions in my mind. It could be that Connie didn't know who the man was, but if so, why was he nervous about me talking to his bartender? And there was one other consideration. It was something more obvious, more simple in nature than one would have thought. So simple, in fact, that it was likely to point to the murderer.

"Mr. Gwinn," Jacks greeted me as I entered the Reef Bar. "A bit early for chu, no?" he smiled, putting down the last glass being subjected to his smearing around the soap suds left on it from a not too thorough washing, with an over used dishrag. "Chu want some'ting?"

I nodded as I sat heavily on one of the bar stools. I was the only customer, since it wasn't yet noontime, when the locals would take time off for some liquid frivolity. Also, since it was Monday, there wouldn't be any Brits around. They flooded the place on Friday through Sunday nights. "I better stick with beer. I had one already. Wouldn't want to change in mid-day, right?" I grinned. "Fosters, though."

He responded in kind, and set a can of Fosters, the Australian nectar, on the counter in front of me. "Glass?" he asked, as he popped open the top.

I shrugged, showing my indifference to the question. He didn't provide the glass.

"Tell me, Jacks," I began after a quick sip of the beer. "How long have you been working here?" I hoped it sounded like a friendly conversational opening rather than an interrogation.

"Gee, Mon," he said, screwing up his brow in thought. "I t'ink, may be, fa da mos' t'ree years, may be more."

"You know most of the locals, right?"

He looked me in the eye before answering that question. It seemed to him a silly one. Of course it would. How many locals were there in San Pedro Town, anyway? "Yeah, Mon," he responded at length.

I pulled out the photo of the dead guy, and showed it to him. "Ever seen him before?"

His eyes went big. "Yeah, Mon. I..., it....." He stuttered over his answer.

"I mean before this morning," I quickly interrupted.

He relaxed a bit. He nodded, slowly, at first, then more emphatic by his fourth nod.

I waited. Finally I had to ask. "Are you going to tell me where?"

"I t'ink, I no be fa da sure, bit I t'ink he may be da Mon who spak wid Mr. Dhafi las' night."

"Mr. Dhafi?"

"Chu know him, Mon?"

Everyone knew Mr. Dhafi. Everyone who lived on the cays did, that is. He was the local distributor of grassy things. And I don't mean horse feed. "Last night?" I repeated for certainty.

"Yeah, mon."

What time was it? Late, or early?"

"I t'ink, may be, it was late. Near close time. I remember 'cause the lady policemen's..."

"Gracious?"

"Yeah, mon. She's name Gracious. She be makin' her peace rounds dat night."

"She was on duty, here? Last night?"

"Yeah, mon. It be important. Da time?"

"I don't know, yet." I took a long swallow of the Fosters. I let it settle in my empty stomach while I thought. Yesterday afternoon was when the DC-3 barely missed the Tropic Air flight I was on. An idea began forming in my mind which, by then, was beginning to show effects of the beer. "Did you manage to hear anything they said to each other?"

“No,” he shook his head in thought. “Only...”

“Only what?”

“Dey seem, may be dey argue. Hot words, I t’ink.”

“About what?”

“I doan listen, chu know. I make da drinks, I serve da beer. Dey go quiet lak when the lady policemen’s come in. But when she go, day tak up, ‘gain.”

“Yeah, right. You never listen to what anybody says in here.” I retrieved a twenty dollar bill, American, from my pocket and held it out. His eyes lit up. It was more than he made in a week as a bartender, not counting tips, of course. “What’d you hear?”

“I t’ink dey be arguin’ ‘bout money. Mr. George, he say dat mon not pay ‘nough. da mon, he say he pay too much.”

“Drug deal?”

Jacks shrugged. Before he could add anything, the front door opened. He looked up and grinned, undoubtedly feeling relieved by the interruption.

“I had a hunch I’d find you here, Penn,” the intruder commented as she floated her gorgeous black body onto a stool beside me. Her smile out-shined the silver badge on her uniform shirt. “What do you have to tell me about this mysterious man, or perhaps I should say half man, in David’s freezer?”

“Hi, Gracious. I didn’t expect you’d be the officer assigned to this mess.”

“You have objections?” She smiled at me.

“Hah! Hardly.” Her intent was a shared moment. It held memories of many intimately shared moments. “Why is it you only come over from the mainland when you have work to do?”

She frowned, and looked down. “Let’s not go into that, again. Please.”

So, what choice had I? We didn’t get into that, again. Much as I wanted to, no, much as I needed to.

We once had a lively affair, or was it a fling? Whatever it was, it was intense, enjoyable, and the greatest thing that ever happened to me. The problem was, she’s Garifuna, and I’m Caucasian. Even in Belize, there are some strong color lines. Her parents objected.

Her father was the vice-premier at the time, I didn’t want to leave Belize under house arrest, so we called it off. Besides that, I strongly suspect the fact that I was getting too close to determining the basis for his unofficial income was an incentive for him. I learned of his connections to Mr. Dhafi, but I couldn’t prove them. At the time I wasn’t sure I even wanted to.

So, at least I was able to stay in the country and say hello to Gracious sometimes. I was patient, hoping her father would lose the election, and his power. But he won, even though he crossed political boundaries and won with the opposing party. Few people knew why he was able to carry that off, and again I kept my mouth shut. She and I kept it called off; and still keep it called off. The strength of memories couldn’t be called off, though.

I wanted to change the subject. “By the way, how come you’re playing cop over here instead of in the City?”

She sidestepped my question. “From what I understand, it was an accident? Or suicide, even?”

“How did you get that idea?”

“I spoke with Connie before finding you.”

“He certainly gets around, doesn’t he?”

“So, was it?”

“Hardly,” I frowned.

“How so?”

“Let me see. Your conclusion would be that George, Mr. Dhafi and the mysterious dead man had a heated, but apparently friendly, discussion in the bar. They moved out onto the porch. They were drinking. George challenged the newcomer to the traditional run around the rings. The newcomer slipped, hit his head on one of the poles, and got chomped on. It happened after the Brits left, of course. It was Sunday night, and they had to be back at their base by curfew, so there was no one else on the porch to witness the incident. Mr. Dhafi, being in the business he is in, was certain there would be some unwanted questions, so he left, not telling anyone about the incident, as did George.”

“I should write it up that way?”

“Or, how about suicide?”

“Meaning?” Her smile faded.

“He lost the argument with Mr. Dhafi, and was about to lose everything. We know how Dhafi controls everything he comes in contact with. He couldn’t take it. He wandered out to the back porch, saw the sharks, and decided a convenient slip would be an effective way to end it all. But, he didn’t plan on being caught on the nail which kept him from going all the way into the water to be, ah, shall I say, disappeared. Ergo, we’re left with half of him to dispose of.”

“I suppose you’re going to make this difficult.”

“Actually, I think it’s easy. We merely have to talk with Mr. George and find out which hypothesis is supported.”

“You don’t believe either one of them?”

I couldn’t decide if her answer was a question or a sarcastic remark. “Who knows?” I got up from the stool and left the bar, much to her surprise. But by then I’d had too much of her. Too much strain on my emotions by her presence. Hell, she was the cop. Let her answer her own questions. But I was for damned sure going to get the answers before she did. It was time to visit George Flambé.

“Mr. Gwinn,” George greeted me as I got out of the car I rented. He was sitting on the porch of his lavish home built on the edge of the Caribbean. Or, as it should be more aptly put, on the edge of the mango swamps lining the central Belizean Coast, the Quintana Roo. He saluted with a iced drink. “What gives me the pleasure of a visit by such a distinguished person?”

Everyone in Belize was a comedian now days. “I can’t say I was just passing through,” I responded with matching satire.

“Care for a drink?”

I shook my head. I hoped he would be as pleasant after our talk as he was at the present. “Actually, I have to ask you a question or two?”

He frowned. “I strongly suspect you mean about last night? I suppose you do, unfortunately. I guess you are going to disturb my peace, my wah, aren’t you? I was told you might be coming by.”

I was about to ask him who told him, but the other comment was more of a surprise. “You knew you were going to be the main suspect?”

He shrugged.

“Why didn’t you report the incident to the police? If you’re not involved, that would have helped.”

He chuckled. “Come, Mr. Gwinn. Surely you know the answer to that question?”

I admitted I did. “Do you mind telling me what happened?”

“What I tell you, will it get repeated to the police? Exactly as I tell you, that is?”

“How did he fall?” I interrupted him before he demanded an answer from me to his question. Of course I was going to repeat his story to the police. What I wouldn't tell him was that it would be my interpretation of his story, not the one he expected me to deliver as his alibi.

“We had an, oh, let's just say a discussion, at about closing time.” He took a sip of his drink. “But, I suspect you already know that, as well.”

“Why would I know that?” I looked at him with my most stoic expression, one which I was sure demanded an answer.

“Ah, well,” he sighed, ignoring the question. “We decided it was a little too hot inside the bar, so we moved to the back porch. It was near closing time. I explained the shark corral and the challenge of running the ring. He decided he wanted to try it. He did. Unfortunately he didn't make it, and fell. Like I said, I left because I didn't want to speak with the police.”

“So you just left him hanging there?”

“Within seconds it was obvious there was nothing I could do to save him. I was not in sufficient awareness, shall we say, to try moving out on the posts without adding to the feeding frenzy. So...”

“So, you just sneaked out?”

He shrugged his response.

“What were you two arguing about?”

He again shrugged. It was clear I wasn't going to learn the answer to that question, but I had to try. “Did it have anything to do with that DC-3 that flew in yesterday afternoon?”

“What do you know about that? I mean, I'm not sure I know what you're getting at. Is there anything about a DC-3 that I should know about?”

His weakness was obvious, but I wasn't about to challenge his veracity on the porch of his home. I had a greater sense of self preservation than that.

“It's just something I heard about,” I said. “A rumor, I guess. A story one of the Maya Airline pilots told. You know how they are. Anything to liven up their routine.”

I lied about the airline at the last minute. It could have been a good trick, one to catch him with, but it didn't work. If he had remarked about Tropic, it would have shown he knew about it. Otherwise? Another flop.

“I see. Well, I guess you have your answers now, don't you?”

The suggestion in the question was clear. “There's nothing more to it, then, is there? It was an accident.”

“I think the bartender, what was his name, Jacks? Yes. I am sure Jacks will back me up on this.”

Sure he will, I thought, as soon as you pay him off. I didn't tell him he was going to be too late in setting that up. I left without disturbing his wah any further, but with a sense my guess was right.

It was well into the late afternoon when I arrived back in Belize City. The sun was setting, and there were no more flights back to the Caye. I decided I might as well grab a room for the night.

There are a great number of Chinese descendents in the country of Belize. Most of them are in the hotel, food and restaurant business, or some kind of mercantile business. Between them as

the business owners and the Garifuna as the educators, the country can boast a 98% literacy rate. That means 98% of the people can read a newspaper and understand what they're reading.

The hotel I chose, one of my favorites, was one of the few non-Chinese run. It was the 4 Fort Street Guest House. The rooms are always clean, the linen is changed after every guest checked out, and it's near the downtown area that supports my favorite restaurant, Mom's Triangle Café.

The only thing I didn't like about it, and what was going to be proven again, was the lack of security. The two owners, girlfriends from Alabama, had too much faith in the natural honesty of the populace. Sometimes that faith was unfounded.

I checked into the room, checked out the bathroom, then went out to eat at Mom's. It was a typically beautiful evening, such as you can only find in the tropics, so I decided to walk, rather than catch a cab. That decision was a mistake, or nearly so.

I rounded the corner onto Queen Street in full stride, trying to not breathe the exhaust from the plethora of more than twenty year old model station wagons the cabbies used to battle traffic and each other in their pecuniary fight for existence. I coughed out some smog, and while my eyes were closed, I tripped on a mis-matched joint in the concrete sidewalk.

As I fell forward, with my hands out in front of me for protection, a shot was fired from somewhere behind me. The bullet chipped the plaster off the building where I was walking.

Instead of scrambling to my feet, I rolled three times to the side, and took refuge behind a parked Suzuki Samarai.

The second bullet ricocheted off the sidewalk and through a shop window, scattering glass everywhere.

The third took out the window of the Suzuki above my head.

I was getting worried. The slugs were getting closer.

I tried to push myself under the frame of the Suzuki. I hoped I could get a look at the shooter, or at the car the shooter must be in, but by that time, tires squealed, horns honked, drivers shouted at one another, and traffic came to a stand still.

There were no more shots fired, so I scrambled to my feet, keeping the Suzuki as a shield.

I looked up and down the street. Pedestrians were huddled in every nook and cranny of store fronts, and pushed up against the sides of buildings, but not one of them was running, or trying to avoid being caught. That meant none of them was the shooter. And that meant I was not likely to be successful in my search.

I gathered up my nerves and struck out again, although with a much greater sense of caution, looking over my shoulder every other step, or so, until I reached Mom's.

It wasn't until after my third cup of coffee that I tried putting the scenario together, the story, the facts. And here were the facts, I mused, grabbing a paper napkin and retrieving my pen from my shirt pocket.

One: The half-left man had been murdered. That was certain, and the only person, or persons, who realized why that was true, were me and the killer.

Two: I challenged the last person to admit seeing him alive, and he claimed it was an accident. He even provided a potential witness, even though he wasn't aware I already interviewed the witness and found some holes in his story. He was also aware in advance that I was going to pay him a visit. That meant someone had to have told him to expect me. Someone who knew I was looking into the incident.

Three: He was disturbed when I remarked about the DC-3. Since he was unofficially known to be a drug dealer, he knew damn well, or at least I knew damn well he knew damned well the

purpose of the DC-3's flight.

Four: Someone attempted to kill me soon after I talked with Mr. George.

Five: Not even Mr. Dhafi could clear the arrival of a DC-3 into this country without the British Harrier jets intercepting it. That could only be arranged by a very important person.

Conclusion: Mr. Dhafi knows I know who killed the half man, he told the killer, and the killer tried to kill me to shut me up. Why? Because the killer knows I can prove guilt.

I had one stop to make to verify my information. The American Embassy and the DEA undercover agent from Guatemala who maintains an un-official unsanctioned office there. I was going to show him the photos David took.

My next move would be to prove my conclusion.

I used my cell phone to call Gracious. She said she was pleased to hear from me, and glad I was safe after I told her about the shooting. She agreed to meet me in the Bellevue Hotel Lounge that night, since she had returned to the City after I left the Caye. The Bellevue bragged one of the nicer lounges in the City.

My next call was to an old friend, Marc Childers, a former policeman who was caught up in the drug trade some years earlier, which resulted in his being a former cop, who now ran the only electronics repair shop in the country. I needed to talk to him, and we agreed the next day would be best.

"Hello, Gracious," I greeted my former love that evening over a Myers's and ginger ale.

She smiled and planted a light kiss on my cheek in response. "Okay," she said, getting right to business even before I offered her a drink. "What's your theory? Can I make an arrest?"

I shrugged with a dour frown. "I can prove who the killer is, but I'm not sure you can make an arrest."

"That seems a bit contradictory."

"How much is Mr. Dhafi into you for?" I asked. "How much does he have on you and your father's drug smuggling?"

The question produced the expected shock. "What on earth do you mean?" She wasn't sure I was serious or not. She thought about it. Her initial curious expression turned into a glare. "What the hell do you mean?"

There was a definite change in her demeanor with the last question. She sat back, and realized the entire picture as I saw it. "What was my mistake?" she demanded, although in a softer tone. Maybe she believed she could rely in my emotional desire for her. That I would help her.

"You're a native of Belize," I began my explanation. "You have spent your time in and around the waters of the Caribbean. You know damn well Sand Sharks and Lemon Sharks are not man-eaters."

Her mouth opened slightly in realization.

"The victim was a corrupt DEA agent, and he had to have been known by your father, which meant he was also known by you. He was killed before he was dumped into the shark cage. It was supposed to be a convenient way to disguise the murder, only no one expected his shirt to get caught on a bent nail on the post." I stopped for to take a breath. "One other thing. It's a good thing you've always been such a bad shot with that snub nosed .38 you keep hidden in your ankle holster. Otherwise, I think you might have succeeded in shooting me in town this afternoon.

"You think you have it all figured out, don't you?" Her tone was icy enough to freeze an Eskimo. She stepped off her barstool, glaring at me. She stooped to retrieve the small revolver from under her pants leg. It was good thing the police in Belize weren't allowed to carry guns, or I'd have

been dead at that instant. She could have drawn one from her waist a lot quicker.

Childers had come into the lounge unnoticed, behind Gracious. He crept up behind her, and grabbed her before she reached her gun. He clamped his arms around her and threw her on the floor, then sat on her back, holding her hands behind her.

I reached into his back pocket and got the plastic wire wraps he carried in lieu of the much heavier steel hand cuffs. It took less than twenty seconds to bind her wrists together with one long wire wrap, run another around her belt and her wrists, and just to be safe, to tie her two ankles together, as well.

I held my breath, squeezed my eyes to avoid letting the tears form, and turned around. We had a good thing, once, she and I, but we called it off. We kept it called off. I once hoped the calling off would be called off, but now it was not possible. It was now permanently called off. I couldn't believe it, and I wasn't sure I was going to be able to cope with it.

Belize has a secret police service. It's called the S.I.S. They were more than pleased when I presented them with Gracious, the story behind the DEA agent's murder, and the connections of the corrupt vice-premier and Mr. Dhafi. Luckily, they took swift action, or the next person to be dumped over the shark cage might have been me.

I sometimes wonder why I tried to retire in Belize.