

The heavy smell on the British Airways flight and brief prison-time with JFK security Check-In, were distant thoughts. In a few hours, Chris would be in tropical paradise; The Pharisee Islands of the Caribbean—a brand new start.

The flight from JFK and arrival in San Juan had been rough, but Chris' eyes receded as he fell into a pool of thought about his impending new existence.

He would be free; unbound to start off as he saw fit. Build his writing career in a place where it was less competitive than London. Learn to drive a car—this had never been a priority in London, but he would take the opportunity in this tropical heaven.

Meet a beautiful girl to share his island experience with, travelling the isles together, walking hand-in-hand down the many beaches with the intoxicating sunset in the background. He'd never had a girlfriend, so the prospect of meeting someone in such a pleasant scenario was exciting.

Then there was the idea of relaxing on the bays after work—a few tasty cocktails on a sun lounger with the sea lapping the shore. Learning how to sail a boat—maybe get a Captain's license? Perhaps dive the oceans—a complete novelty. Explore the sea below with all the incredible, exotic creatures underneath swimming by. Perhaps even try jet skiing or any water-sport available? He could do anything! Then, enjoy the popular resorts around and the multitude of beach bars!

So many possibilities; so many adventures. So much good time to spend; start really enjoying life like never before. If he desired, perhaps move onto the United States to fully realise his future as a successful writer of Young Adult Fantasy novels—his dream. Or perhaps remain in the Caribbean, relocating to another island.

Life was looking bright.

Being in San Juan Airport, Chris had an eleven-hour connection time. Night had fallen and all the internal shops were closed, leaving him to search the large, spacious white-tiled, white-walled complex for a place to lie down and rest.

As he took a spot in a secluded area where other passengers were dotted around, he created a makeshift pillow with his bag and lay across several armless seats.

He noticed a man tossing and turning, sprayed out across chairs ahead of him. The man's lips shivering in response to the air-conditioning throughout the place. Chris closed his eyes and seven hours passed in an atmosphere akin to the frost of a freezer.

He woke from jarred sleep with throbbing aches all over his limbs and teeth.

He ignored it, grabbing his bag, and moving quickly to check-in early for his next and final flight to the Pharisee Islands.

The queue wasn't long at the small gateway to the departure lounge.

Chris stepped up to the metal detectors, loading his bag onto the conveyor belt of the X-ray machine. He made sure he removed every bit of metal, including his belt, and placed them on the personal belongings tray, also for the X-ray.

He walked through the metal detector portal.

The security staff member in front of him—a short man with tanned skin and a prominent moustache—looked up at the detector reading above, then gestured toward the large glass box at the side.

“Step this way for random screening,” he said.

Chris moved inside, feeling his heart-beat increase as the door slammed behind him. There was no seat in this glass prison like there had been in JFK. He looked out at the security guards as they grabbed his bag, then at the other people travelling to the Pharisee Islands, who passed through untroubled.

“This one yours?” the moustached man said from outside the glass box.

Chris nodded. A male and female staff member joined the moustached man and opened his bag.

He watched as the strangers’ hands began to shovel through his belongings. His flight documents, personal qualifications, several pairs of boxer shorts, a camera, and cosmetic products, were all on display while he stood trapped inside a glass cabinet. People peered at him like an exotic, endangered species caged in a zoo.

He clenched his jaw and waited.

“Okay,” the other security guy said as he opened the glass door. “Come this way.”

Chris followed the younger-looking man as he ushered him over to a secluded booth at the side.

“Please take a seat,” he said as he examined Chris’ flight papers. “Why are you travelling to the Pharisee Islands?”

“I’m going to be working there.”

“What’s your profession? ”

“I’m going to be a bartender.”

“What bar will you be working for?”

“Five O’ Clock Somewhere Beach Resort.”

“Okay, that’s all. Thank you for answering my questions in this random screening.”

Chris frowned, stared at the ground, then back at the security employee. “This isn’t random though, is it?” he said.

The security guy grinned.

“Come on,” Chris continued and forced a tight-lipped smile. He saw the moustached security guard chuckle as he listened in. “We both know that I’ve been selected because I fit some criteria. All I’m asking is that you tell me what that criteria is, so I can avoid this in the future. If it’s something I’m wearing or doing—anything physical, I’ll change it.”

“Man, that’s deep,” said the younger security employee.

“Well, as you can imagine, it’s a little irritating to be called up like this.”

“Man, I would say it’s a little more than irritating. It’s a damn pain in the neck, an invasion of privacy, and it’s humiliating. I got called up myself this year and I work for Homeland Security. But when you’re called, you’re called. There’s nothing you can do. I mean, you can go on our website where it explains all about it but—”

“But that won’t have the criteria, will it?”

“No. When you’re called up, that’s it. It could be your flight ticket number, it could be...” He paused. “Okay, what were you doing just before this?”

Chris took a second. “I was sleeping in the airport. I had an eleven-hour connection time before this flight.”

“Well, it could be that you’ve been spotted for security purposes.”

“Alright.” Chris squinted. “So you’re saying it can be anything that happens during a person’s flight? For example, if a set of security personnel select a guy for screening in another airport, does that mean their entire journey is flagged?”

He gave Chris a look as if to answer *yes*.

“I see,” said Chris. He bit his lip as he thought about JFK Airport Check-In.

“Well, at least you’ve been honest with me,” Chris continued. “Can’t say fairer than that.”

He glanced over to the security lady who was now dealing with his bag. She was doing a second check on the Audiclean product he had. She’d removed the head and was putting the bottle through for an X-Ray.

“Hang tight,” said the young guy. “It’ll be over soon.”

“Thanks,” Chris said and waited as the last of his items were examined.

The lady handed his bag back to him. “I hope I’ve put things back in the order they were in.”

Chris smiled. Grabbing his shoes and belt, he put himself back together again.

“Thanks very much,” he said. “See you later.”

They waved him off and he took his seat in the small departure lounge to rest his head for a few more hours. More people gathered; Chris counted around forty.

Boarding the plane and the thirty-seven minute flight to the Pharisee Islands, felt as instant as sitting down then standing up.

As the plane touched down, Chris looked out the window with slight disbelief.

He was actually here.

He was going to be working in the Caribbean as a beach bartender. This was really happening!

All his fears from earlier had evaporated and were replaced with a wide grin.

Following flight safety announcements, the plane door opened and the humidity outside fell in.

Single file, each person departed from the plane. Chris alighted on the island sweaty and sticky, feeling the heaviness of the heat on his skin, through his black suit. He walked, bag in hand from the tarmac of the landing zone into the immigration department of the small airport. From the outside, it had a clean, cream appearance, but inside, everything that was supposed to be white was yellowing.

Most of the passengers appeared to be ex-pats in their 30s and 40s, who were questioned about their reason for entry, while a few local residents in their 40s and 50s passed through a separate security line with no challenge.

“Next one, step up!” said the dark skinned immigration officer, who was sat in a small booth labelled *Non-Belongers*. To hear the Caribbean accent inspired joy in Chris’ tired body. *I’m really here!* he thought.

Chris stepped up, relieving the travel and Work Permit documents from his bag, and smiled. He’d deliberately gone ahead of the Work Permit medical tests that Pharisee Island Immigration and Labour Departments requested. He presented a completed blood

test, stool test, urine test, skin test, spine X-Ray, chest X-Ray, and the second BCG of his life. He pulled out proof of his clean criminal record and the papers that authorised him to work for Five O’Clock Somewhere Beach Resort.

“What’s the reason for your visit?,” said the officer as he began to read the documents.

“I’ve come to work. That’s all the documents fully completed and I’ve even made sure to do extra medical tests as well, so I should be fully covered.”

The officer glared at Chris, then looked to another immigration worker who was stood at a far side by the carousel, where luggage from the flight was beginning to emerge.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“With my uncle, Vernon Sterno.”

“Ah, the Police Commissioner.”

“Yeah, he’s the one.”

“Okay. Sedrick!” he shouted as his eyes scanned Chris’ medical documents.

The immigration officer called Sedrick walked over.

“Is this right?” he mumbled to his assistant.

Sedrick reviewed them, looked at Chris, then examined the documents more intensely. He scowled at Chris again then turned back to the documents. “No,” he said. “Sir, we need the original medical sign off, not a copy.”

“What?” said Chris. “I was told this is all correct.”

“No sir,” said the seated officer. “We need the original.”

“But my doctor said this would be fine and all immigration laws permit this.”

“Listen, you need to settle down,” said the man called Sedrick. “You’re being very immature.”

Chris went silent. *Really strange choice of words*, he thought but maintained his composure, knowing these men had the power to send him straight back to the UK, no questions. The last time he was on the Pharisee Islands, he’d heard horror stories—he’d even been told that one very upset passenger was returned all the way to Australia, because he hadn’t complied with the right documentation for his Work Permit. This is why Chris had gone the distance and asked for extra medical tests with his GP—to prove his full compliance.

“I’m going to have to confiscate your passport until you sort this out,” said the officer.

Both of them looked away from Chris and continued scanning his paperwork.

“Go on through, collect your luggage, and report to medical in Street Village to have your blood test and stool test approved by our doctors. Get your doctors to send the original copies of all documents, then come back to us here, and we’ll return your passport.”

*How will I get my doctors to send the originals? Chris thought. By mail? How long will it take? When will I be able to work? I have so little money. How am I going to make it?*

“Is there no other way?” Chris said.

The immigration officer’s glare intensified.

“Sedrick, get the supervisor,” he said.

Sedrick strolled toward a door behind the red line that separated the booth and the rest of the airport. He opened it, peered in, shouted something that Chris didn’t quite hear, and then returned with another short, plump, older man waddling behind.

The immigration supervisor looked at Chris once, then turned to the officer and shook his head. He walked back to the room he’d emerged from and closed the door behind him.

*Was he not going to look at the papers?* Chris thought, but remained quiet. The warnings he’d been granted by multiple seasoned travellers, reemerged in his mind. *Do not mess with Pharisee Island Immigration! They are literally the worst in the world and will send you back to where you came from if they have a mind to.*

Chris felt like the game had ended, before it begun. He wanted to tell the immigration officers the trouble he’d gone through to reach this point, the tiny redundancy package he’d received the year before, the humiliation of being unemployed for eleven months, the Job Seekers Allowance fortnightly registrations and benefit payments, the endless job searching, his fast financial decline, the weekends boozing off the remnants of his credit card to numb the reality, the shame of all of it...but, he stayed silent.

“So you need to go and get the original medical documents sent here, and then we can give you your passport back,” he said. “Go through.”

Chris was the last passenger in the airport welcome queue. He saw his two suitcases relieved from the carousel and positioned upright against each other, lonely, and waiting for him.

With his rucksack on his back, he grabbed both suitcases and pulled them through the siding doors into the main area of the small airport, where food kiosks and bureaus for changing money were visible along the sides of the main area. Check-In queues to small regional airlines had a few people lined up.

Straight ahead of him through another set of open doors, he could see a smooth-looking, black four-by-four with his uncle Vernon Sterno seated inside. He waved Chris over.

Chris pulled his bags outside and the midday sun poured over him. Vernon stepped out of his car. He was a tall man of sixty years, but his age hadn’t weighed on his physique. He was about six foot three, well-built with thick forearms, light enough skin to appear mixed race, and a receding hair line. His arched lips made him seem permanently serious. He was wearing a short-sleeved, grey buttoned shirt tucked into his black trousers, a buckle belt, and black shoes polished to a shine.

“You good?” he said as he whipped around to the back of his car and opened the boot.

“I’m alright Vernon,” said Chris as the bright sun beat down on his black suit jacket. “Had some problems with immigration, but I’m hoping to sort it out with the medical unit as soon as I can.”

“What problems?” he said as Chris passed him his suitcases for the boot.

“They said I need the original copy of my medical tests. I told them that the doctors had said copies are fine, but they insisted on the originals.”

We jumped in his car.

“They’ve confiscated my passport,” continued Chris.

“They what?” he replied calmly as he started the ignition. “They shouldn’t be doing that.”

“I’d been told it could happen, so I’m just going to do what the immigration guy said and try to work it out with the medical people in town. See if they can approve my doctor’s word without me having to get the original documents sent across from the UK.”

“Sending them could take months. Mail is very slow here you know and things get lost a lot.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Chris replied, and let his head fall. “But just got to see what the doctors here say.”

Vernon went quiet as they drove out of the airport.

Chris peered out the window at the tall palm trees standing outside; an instant indicator that he was in a very different part of the world now.

The drive continued across a long bridge with yellow barriers connecting to the main island, Mortigno—Chris’ new home. He observed the mountainous terrain and detached buildings dotted around the green. Being the largest of the Pharisee Islands, it was shaped so a main road lined the outside of it and the mountains lay in the centre with winding roads cutting through the country greenery.

The sea stretched out, beautiful and clear with schools of fish swimming underneath, and the sky was cloudless-blue.

Progressing along a cracked and broken main road, the sea disappeared from view and they entered into a rundown part of the island. Dilapidated apartment buildings, partially-finished construction projects, and wooden shacks scattered the sides of the roads. Men and women, old and young in colourful clothing walked the streets, going about their lives. Many looked fatigued. Some carried bags of groceries, others handled bottles of Guinness or Heineken. Some wore clothes that hung from them like rags and the shine on their foreheads revealed the sun’s heat.

There were few other motorists—not busy—but sufficient to show the atmosphere was alive.

As they proceeded, the roads turned into smoother paving. A huge college building came into sight amid large green grounds, then as they moved over the hills, they were back against the open sea on their left. Chris couldn’t resist a smile, hypnotised by the blue of the ocean and the cleanness of the sky.

“So I got a message waiting for you at home,” said Vernon.

“A message?” replied Chris.

“You remember Saul, the boy from the Administration Complex?”

Images of the people Chris met the last time he was on the islands, flashed through

his mind. He remembered Saul quickly. A thirty-eight year-old guy with a huge upper frame, about Chris' height with lighter skin, always smartly dressed. His top left eyelid was permanently lower, he branded a mischievous grin, and he seemed to enjoy inciting political debates in the lobby area of the Administration Complex—the main government building of the island. Regardless of his troublesome demeanour, when they'd spoken, he'd assured Chris he'd assist in keeping an eye out for writing opportunities.

“Yeah, I remember him,” said Chris. “What’s he saying?”

“He said he has a journalist role for you.”

Chris grinned wider. “Really?”

“Yeah. He’s left a phone message.”

“Great.”

Chris relished the surge of energy that flushed through his body as the car flew across the hilly roads into the centre of the island. The heat of the tropical climate accompanied by the fresh breeze of sea air breathed hope. Life. A new start!

*I’ve made it, Chris thought. It’s really happening. And so quickly!*

They reached the town hub of the island—Street Village—with its many detached buildings housing offices, banks, retailers, and restaurants. Passing the central roundabout of town, the architecture had a modern city appearance with a vibrant Caribbean colour theme. The financial and law firms maintained a conservative look, while other retailers were painted pink, orange, sky blue, or yellow. Each establishment—whether a medical a centre, a clothes store, a law firm, a bank—made its name clear with a giant sign and accompanying logo high up for all to see.

Approaching a road that paralleled the sea again, Chris recognised where they were as they passed the gated Pharisee Islands’ Governor’s mansion, neighbouring the estate where Vernon lived. It was a tranquil estate, with large bungalows facing opposite one another along an upward inclined cul de sac. Housed in each large bungalow was a significant member of the island judiciary.

Nearing the end of the rugged, concrete lane of the cul de sac, the car pulled up in sheltered parking outside Vernon’s bungalow. They relieved themselves from the car. They walked to the boot, opened it, and retrieved Chris’ suitcases from the back.

Chris looked down the slope to see an unimpeded view of the perfect ocean and other islands far off in the distance.

He was here. He’d made it!

Two huge barking Dobermans ran up to an adjacent white fence, cordoning off a massive garden that stretched around Vernon’s property.

Chris stood his ground, but recognised that if the dogs made more effort, they could clear that fence.

“Quiet down! You hear?” shouted Vernon. He walked toward the hugest of the dogs with a coat as black as night.

“Rocky,” he said and stuck his hand in the Doberman’s mouth. He turned to Chris, his face remaining serious. “Can’t be scared of them. They smell fear.”

Chris nodded.

Vernon walked toward the front door and unlocked it. Chris followed in, wheeling his suitcase behind. The dogs continued to bark outside.

“What I suggest you do is get yourself unpacked, listen to the phone message, and I’ll take you to meet up with the guy for the job,” said Vernon.

“Sounds good,” Chris replied.

“Okay. I’ve also got to have you meet the dogs.”

Chris frowned.

“They need to get used to your scent,” said Vernon. “Or they’ll think you’re an intruder.”

“Oh,” replied Chris. “Okay.”

Vernon retreated to a room right of the front door into what Chris remembered was his bedroom.

Chris inhaled the scent of jasmine—a reminder he was in a new location now, a new start, living with a new person, in a new world. Standing in the large open-plan kitchen area with its dining table and dark wooden oak theme—the welcoming room of the home—he pulled his luggage through to the left of the front door, then passed through the dining room with another dining table—although this one was more elegantly poised with a cream throw cover, intricately designed at the edges. The sun beamed in through the glass doors and drapes, adding an airy feel to the space. A white-tiled balcony led out onto a huge garden below and a view of the sea sparkling from the sun’s rays.

Chris peered into the adjacent sitting room; a picture of Martin Luther King Jr sat on the wall over the television docking setup. Old photos of Chris’ uncles, aunts, and cousins were organised along the television stand. He spotted one of his mother, sister, brother and him. He felt his stomach punch out and his eyes well-up.

He continued walking in the opposite direction through the dining room into a short, cream-tiled corridor. He found his room on the left and further down was his bathroom on the right. He opened the door to his bedroom, his new place of residence. It was just like he remembered it from last time; a king-size bed with a leopard printed on the covers as well a matching rug with two of the ferocious big-cats. The sunlight beamed in through the window, illuminating the room and adding an extra sense of space. There was something grand about the bedroom. Perhaps it was the colours of gold and black that stood out on the rug and bed covers; it contributed to Chris’ new standing. He’d made it. He’d escaped the rat-race of London and was living in Caribbean paradise. The smile on his face grew again.

He opened up his suitcases and his eyes popped, wiping away his grin. In the larger one, the compartment where he’d specifically placed accessories that could leak, had been slashed open. The mesh fabric material lay frayed, taunting him that there was nothing he could do. Chris found his black shoe polish unscrewed and sitting on the lightest of his clothing—his white jumper. His mind drifted back to JFK Airport and he shook his head. Could they have reached his luggage? Would they have gone through that much effort to hurt him? Or, was it just some random incident with a disgruntled employee?

“Don’t forget to listen to the message!” shouted Vernon from the other side of the bungalow.

“Will do!” Chris replied. He changed into blue jeans, a black T-shirt, a buckle belt, with his black shoes and hosed himself down with Lynx deodorant spray.

He moved into the dining room where the digital home phone was and pressed the button to replay messages. As the automated answering machine relayed one saved message, a voice that Chris recognised came in.

“Hello Mr. Vernon Sterno. This is a message for your nephew, Christopher Charles. I’m calling because an online newspaper called SINN are looking for a reporter for their team and Jacob Cain, the Chief Editor wants to meet him at Fives as soon as possible. Call me back on this number.” He stated his contact number twice. “Thank you and have a good day.”

Chris smiled. He picked up the phone and made the call.

“Hi Saul, this is Christopher Charles, Vernon Sterno’s nephew.”

“Hello Chris,” replied Saul. “Welcome back to the islands dude.”

Chris smiled again. Just hearing those words *welcome back to the islands* meant great new adventures. A positive life. A bright future. Finally get to live.

“Really good to be back,” said Chris. “You left a message about a possible reporter job?”

“Yes. Your uncle has already arranged a meeting for us.” He paused. “It’s in a bit actually. My cousin’s running this paper. It’s an online News site. He’s looking for a News Director and Marketing Executive who’s punctual, organised, and who will make the website number one in all the Pharisee Islands.”

He sounded like he was reading the job details from an advertisement.

“Sorry, who’s the guy running the paper?” Chris asked.

“Jacob Cain. Did you meet him before?”

“No. I don’t think I did. What’s he like?”

“He’s a good guy. He’s my cousin. Good guy, good guy.”

“Okay. Great. Well, uh. I suppose I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay. Later.”

Chris put the phone down and smiled.

Only a few minutes into entering paradise and things were looking extremely good.

He squinted and stopped smiling. His head went cold and his entire face tensed.

*Jacob Cain. Jacob Cain*, he replayed in his mind. The name was ringing fire alarm bells in Chris’ head and his stomach plummeted. He repeated the name in his mind again, feeling like a rabbit sniffing after a carrot gently placed in an open bear trap.

*Jacob Cain. Jacob Cain.*

There was something very wrong with this situation.

Chris couldn’t remember what it was about the name.

He stared at the dining room wall.

*This isn’t good. This isn’t good at all. Jacob Cain, who is he?*