

Your Free Gift

The Paradise Induction

Chapters 1 - 6

By Stephen L France

Taking off My Shoes – *The Start*

You'd think that moving to the beautiful Caribbean islands from the smog of London City life would be a dream come true...but I know different.

No matter how this story comes across, I fully appreciated the great gift of being allowed to experience my five-year stay in the tropics. But I wrote this life-changing journey not to boast or celebrate, nor mourn, or wallow. I didn't write it as a complaint, nor for revenge.

I wrote it because it's a tale that's a little different from the norm.

It's nothing overtly special—just another life with all the trials and tribulations that emerge. There's greater fortune out there and even fiercer tragedy. This is simply an account that's slightly...irregular.

I honestly don't know if people will enjoy this or feel saddened by it, love it, hate it, or be completely indifferent. For the most part, I hope it bestows a few life-lessons and enlightens people about 'people.'

But let me be frank...

...in the following story, I get murdered.

Not once. Not twice. Not three times.

I get killed repeatedly in the deepest sense that a person can experience death, without emerging as a corpse.

The worst part of it?

I had no idea any of it was coming. No concept that an island so sunny could be so dark.

I walked in blind.

All I knew at the time, was that I was restarting life in a culture I'd never experienced, with a job that people dream about; all of this in a land that western society perceives as a veritable paradise; a place that provokes everybody's envy.

This blissful-looking 'paradise,' would be the architecture of my coffin.

Christopher Charles

CHAPTER ONE

The Big Change

The Big Change

Wednesday, March 10, 9:36 a.m. (GMT) – London Heathrow Airport

Chris peered out of the vehicle that was about to change his life forever.

From what he could see, hundreds of passengers ready to fly across the Atlantic had boarded the jumbo-size airplane. Excited chatter of the trip ahead surrounded him, forcing the reality in; he was travelling to the other side of the world to start his life over—be born again in Caribbean paradise.

Pleased he was positioned in a seat with a window, the allotted flight time was over seven hours to his first stop JFK, New York. Thankfully, the view from the plane would remove any form of claustrophobia, that might attempt to afflict him.

He felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” said the woman seated beside him. “I’ve got a bit of a favour to ask you. I understand if you say ‘no’ but well...do you mind if my son swaps seats with you to sit by the window? He was really hoping for a seat with a view of the sky and it’s his first time on a plane.”

Chris’ head flicked to look out the window before he turned back to the woman, whose tired eyes sagged with her forced smile of discoloured teeth.

“Sure,” he said and began unfastening his seat belt.

“Thank you so so much,” she replied, as if his answer took the world off her shoulders.

“That’s alright,” he replied, rising from the chair and squeezing out from between

the row of seats.

The small boy of about ten, who was already stood in the aisle with a nervous smile on his face, jumped across his mother, and took his new place.

As Chris sat down beside the aisle and fastened his seat belt, he nodded at the child.

The kid stared out the window and Chris could see his inflated cheeks protruding, indicating his grin.

“Thank you ever so much,” repeated the woman in a way that sounded like she was catching her breath. “What’s your name?”

“Chris,” he said.

“I’m Eadie and this is Darren. What do you say to Chris?” said the mother, prodding her son.

“Thank you Chris!” exclaimed Darren, whose glee provoked a smile of nostalgia on Chris’ face; he recalled his own first flight as a child and sitting by the window was like a lottery jackpot win.

“That’s okay,” replied Chris.

She extended her hand. “Nice to meet you and really, thank you for that. You’re very kind.”

“That’s quite alright, and nice to meet you too.” He shook her hand.

“Looks like we’re ready then, innit?” she said.

“Looks that way.”

“So are you headed to New York as well?”

“No. Change of flights at New York to go to San Juan, and then onto the

Pharisee Islands.”

“Wow, sounds very exotic. Never heard of them.” She pronounced the word ‘exotic’ as if the very vocabulary was exotic to her lips.

“Not many people have,” Chris stated, having visited the islands before. “They’re really unknown on our side of the world and we don’t even see them advertised in the UK, but they’re a group of Caribbean islands owned by the British just under Puerto Rico.”

“How long you there for then?”

“Could be a year. Could be many years. I’m not sure yet.”

“Oh, so you’re moving out there then?”

Chris nodded.

“Wow,” she droned like a child seeing Disney World for the first time. “Have you been there before?” she continued.

“Yeah, I was there on holiday before so just um—” Chris paused to collect his thoughts. “Just seeing how things go when I arrive.”

“You got a job out there as well?”

“Um, yeah, uh. I’m going to be a bartender for the first time in my life.” He pushed out a smile.

“Oh wow—you’re gonna have a great time, all them lovely ladies,” she said, then leaned in close to Chris. “Bet they’re gonna love you.”

Chris continued to uphold the smile, as if learning to tense a muscle for the very first time. “It’s definitely gonna be a new experience, that’s for sure.”

The woman leered. “Oh I’m sure it will be.” She turned back to her son. “Make

sure you're buckled in there love."

Chris scanned the plane, seeing everyone seated. The cabin crew were walking backwards down the two aisles, checking passengers were buckled in. The plane's automated announcement-bell rang; the Captain greeted his passengers through the intercom and the screens on the backs of chairs, broadcasted an airline safety video.

Chris let his chin rest on his chest and closed his eyes.

The night before, one of his longstanding Primary School friends Abdul Rashid had reassured him about his impending, life-changing journey: "No matter what Chris, when you hear that plane engine, you'll be excited."

Chris had guaranteed to Abdul that his mind was in such a strange place about crossing to the other side of the world, that he wouldn't be excited at all.

His friend had protested.

The low growling of the plane's engine commenced. The vehicle began to gain speed. And then, the authoritative roar of the jet projecting them forward informed Chris of the uncompromising truth; *no turning back now*.

His face remained blank.

Before he digested it, the vessel was flying out of London Heathrow Airport, soaring toward New York. It all seemed like he was playing out a prophesied scenario—a segment of his life he'd known he was going to have to live.

He was conscious that his feelings toward this transition were unusual—that most people would be brimming with enthusiasm over emigrating to tropical Caribbean paradise; the islands, with their soothing heat, white sand beaches, glowing sun, azure blue ocean, beautiful women, and tasty cocktails.

It was an escape plan he'd promised himself long ago, but now, it felt like an obligatory relocation—as if he'd been forced out of London completely against his will.

With his eyes still closed, he swallowed hard and his eyes welled up. Just hours ago, he'd said goodbye to his parents. He replayed the last words he held with them in his mind.

“Ready to go? Everything packed up?” his mother said.

Chris nodded.

“Okay then, let's do it,” she continued, grabbing his hand-luggage and making her way out the door.

He examined himself one final time in the hallway mirror.

This is the last time I'll see myself in this mirror for ages, he thought, fixing the collar on his favourite blue shirt; a positive shirt that held good memories and seemed fitting for this life-changing occasion.

He took a deep sigh.

He checked his wallet to see his last two hundred pounds from Job Seekers Allowance payments converted into American dollars, then put it away. He brushed a speck of dust off the shoulder of his black suit and nodded at his reflection.

Goodbye.

“Come on,” his mother said, pulling him from the abyss of hesitation. He grabbed his two suitcases—one in hand and one pulling behind him as they left their small flat in

Pimlico, Central London.

On the concrete landing, they walked down the switch-back stairs. He balanced the luggage with the steps as the plastic wheels echoed hard into the apartment block with each drop.

Leaving for University had been different to this; Exeter was a train journey away from London. This trip felt permanent; a disconcerting thought like an irritating cut deep inside his ear.

The thought kept harassing him as if there was a possibility he'd never be coming back to the city of smog. Perhaps it kept goading him because that prospect was a potential reality. He'd hated London his whole conscious life and knew he should be happy with this escape plan. He was finally getting out of this horrible, rude, and emotionally-cold City where no one cared for you. Where people never had the common courtesy to say "please" and "thank you." Where mornings going to work were like being part of a mischief of desperate rats, scurrying toward food with no thought of the rat next to them.

Reaching the bottom floor and exiting the block of flats into the avenue, where two rows of apartments were situated on either side, he wheeled his luggage.

Was this really happening? Leaving home like this? Running so far to the other side of the world?

He'd promised himself he'd do it, but to actually be walking the walk—it felt like a death march. Like the vow he'd made was not about grasping freedom, but a debtor coming to collect what was promised ten years ago. Like the devil making good on the bargain; Chris' soul for his escape from London.

They reached his mother's car outside of the avenue on the main street. The scratch across the silver BMW's driver door, was a reminder of the malicious nature of London. His mother had scraped and saved to own that car. Even though the vehicle was way out of her means, it had been one of her dreams; lax regulation over UK credit-lending helped. So to see that deep scar across the paintwork—the fact that people would intentionally be vicious in London—jarred Chris.

Sometimes, these unsavoury characters would do it for something. Sometimes for nothing, and of course they'd be completely oblivious to all circumstances of the victim. Taking action like this—to jam a jagged object with purposeful force into a car, and cause conspicuous destruction. Chris shook his head.

As he loaded his luggage into the boot, the coldness inside his mind did not allow his negative feelings about London to support his emigration. Instead, every definitive move toward his relocation, hollowed him out.

He had chosen this. This was his choice. So why did it appear more like he was being forced out of the city he was raised in, than the great escape plan he'd wanted?

The car journey was slow, almost static, like time had come to a standstill.

Winter's end revealed a cloudy, dark sky and dawn presented an absence of life on the streets, complementing the eerie atmosphere.

Think of things that anger you about London, he told himself. Think of the decision you made so long ago. Remember?

But the thoughts weren't working. The only perception that emerged was that he was being pushed out of his country. Exiled. Ostracised. Abdication—the last resort of a desperate man.

“You're going to really enjoy it you know,” his mother said as if reading his mind and helping as best she could.

“Alright,” he mumbled.

They reached Victoria Station, unloaded his luggage, and caught the N38 Bus, heading to Green Park Tube Station.

Sitting at the back of the bus, the vehicle was as dead and empty as the rest of London.

“How were your friends about the whole thing?” his mother continued.

“Mum, I really don't want to talk right now,” he murmured. “I'm just feeling really, really nervous.” He didn't look up to see his mother's response, but could feel her hurt. She was going to miss him terribly, and he was going to miss her more than any words could express.

The bus journey was short.

They were at the Underground station, then on the vacant tube in what felt like seconds. His stomach had taken up champion-level gymnastics.

He used the tube journey to rest his head against the seat, calming his heartbeat, before drifting to sleep.

“Chris. Chris, it's your father,” a voice said.

“What? What?” he replied as he woke.

The tube was now crowded with people carrying varying sized suitcases.

His mother handed him her phone. “It's your father.”

He took the phone and sighed. “Hey dad.”

“Hey son,” he said, sounding excited. “So this is it? The big one.”

“Yeah,” Chris mumbled. The phone signal was low, but he could hear his father’s words. His last words before he’d be on the other side of the globe.

“Well, good luck son. I’m sure it will all fall into place. Just take care of yourself out there, okay?”

“Thanks dad, and I hope it all does. I really do.”

“Alright, well see you soon.”

“See you dad.”

Chris felt sick as he handed the phone back to his mother.

See you soon? his mind questioned. *What a lie.*

He wouldn’t be seeing his father anytime soon if things went to plan and that burned...a lot.

He let his head slump against the seat. The fatigue had been helpful in depleting his energy so he didn’t reveal how he really felt; if he’d had the strength, he likely would have been crying.

The sign Heathrow, flickered in front of him between the windows of the moving tube before he could retreat to the sanctuary of sleep.

“We’re here,” said his mother. He wished his mother wasn’t narrating everything; it just served up more pain that he was actually leaving his home for a very distant land.

He grabbed his bags and they headed out of the cramped, rabble of people pushing out of the Underground. His heart rate was slow, but each thud was the drum beat of impending doom.

He was doing this. He was acting on a decision he’d made when he was fifteen

years old!

If things aren't working out in London by the time I'm twenty-five, I'll leave the country.

Saying it, thinking it, telling people about it as a result of his unhappiness with London—that had been easy, and actually quite the rib-tickler among his friends as he added that he'd live out his days in the Himalayan mountains.

Now, every step Chris took as they made their way to the Heathrow Check-In was like walking on an electrified floor, shocking him with each time his foot landed. He was fulfilling a vow from ten years prior; a promise he'd hoped he'd never have to complete.

The meandering British Airways Check-In queue was quick and lucky; his luggage weighed right on limit, but it was to be expected that it would be heavy. After all, he was carrying his life with him.

The busy airport's passengers were invisible to him as his mind pressed in what he was doing; he was leaving his family; his mother.

He continued with the Check-In procedure; his hand luggage was allowed to be carried on and as soon as he heard permission to move on through, his world stopped.

It was all done.

He stood at the barrier of the airport where his mother couldn't pass.

Her eyes glistened and he held his head down. They both released a muffled “goodbye” without hugging, knowing that it would be far too painful to do so.

He wouldn't be coming back to live in London ever again. This was part of his oath ten years ago. It would be the Caribbean, then maybe the United States. But never

to live in London again. This was his big escape. His chance to start again anew, and erase his failed life of the past.

He went through the gate.

It was finished.

Exiting London air space, the plane was cruising at a stable altitude, according to the Captain.

Chris fought back the stinging in his eyes of tears he didn't wish to show. He pulled a slip of paper out of his suit-jacket, and forced a smile. It was a simple list of the things he planned to do once settled in the Caribbean.

- 1) Pursue my writing career**
- 2) Get a driving license**
- 3) Get bar-tending experience**
- 4) Learn Spanish**
- 5) Stop frowning so much**
- 6) Gain true confidence in myself**

He stashed it away and looked around the plane. A few rows across, he saw a man who wormed around in his seat, sat between an exceptionally large guy and a fidgeting child. He observed another man whose eyes shifted from side to side and

gaunt face looked as though he hadn't eaten a meal in weeks. Chris imagined he was cheap, like the sort of person who would buy a lottery ticket for a best friend's birthday and say, "that could be fifty grand I'm giving you there." The type of person who would make a loud show of any luxury given to him, provided it was free of charge.

He shook his head and as his eyes came into focus on the people near him. A beautiful woman blossomed into view at the seat across from him; mid-twenties, long brown hair, large blue eyes, and a facial expression that exuded warmth. She smiled and he smiled back.

Definitely has a boyfriend, he thought. No question about that.

Chris knowingly relieved the transparent plastic bagging from underneath his seat with the typical airline blanket inside, aware from previous British Airways flights that it was always placed there. He pulled it out, and covered himself. Sleep quickly embraced him.

It must have been an hour – maybe two, thought Chris as he rustled awake. The next thing his senses knew was the horrific stench of raw eggs. But the smell was even more pungent and deep, like chicken left for weeks in a disposal heap. His nostrils almost burned and breathing became difficult.

Chris watched as three, then four, then five people unbuckled their seat belts, got up, and moved away with faces scrunched up like prunes. Some who remained seated held their noses visibly, and others gritted their teeth under closed lips.

"That smell is stinky," said Darren.

"Yeah it's bloody awful innit," replied Eadie. She looked at Chris and shrivelled

her nose. Chris smiled, raising his eyebrows, then scanned the other passengers.

Who had done it? he thought.

The odour began to retreat and just as clean oxygen appeared to surface, the stench slithered back into the atmosphere, drowning Chris with its thick breath.

He shut his nasal cavity, but in breathing through his mouth, he could almost taste the repulsive smell; a tangibility of mouldy cheese on his tongue.

“Oh for Christ’s sake!” shouted a well-spoken, British pensioner as he rose from his seat and moved to the restroom area; ironically, many people had gathered around the space near the toilets to escape.

Some who endured ‘the cloud,’ chuckled quietly, perhaps in nervous disbelief at how terrible the smell was. Others shared in the man’s anger with deeply etched frowns.

The stink intensified, the heat of it brushing Chris’ face. He watched as more people, stood up. One was visibly complaining to the cabin crew, while he saw another raise his head to the sky and breathe an exhalation of relief.

Someone on the plane had a great deal to answer for.

To his side, Chris heard Darren beginning to wretch.

“Oh love,” Eadie said. “Are you alright?”

It happened so fast that the wetness on the bridge of Chris’ nose and lips, confirmed its reality.

The child had projectile vomited over his seat. He’d sprayed the screen in front of him with yellow clumps, forcing bits to rebound into his mother’s lap and Chris’ face.

“Oh dear! What have you done?” Eadie exclaimed. “Oh dear, oh dear. So sorry about this,” she said, talking to Chris. “Here take this.” She handed Chris a wet-wipe.

“Thanks very much,” said Chris, wiping his nose and mouth. “It’s okay. Happens to the best of us.” He stood up in the aisle, ready for the child’s inevitable escort to the restroom.

“Thank you,” said Eadie as she ushered her son out.

From standing point, Chris continued to survey the faces of the people around him. More got up and moved out of the stink space. From a distance, he could read their lips as they spoke to the cabin crew—they weren’t happy.

The smell kept dimming, then growing worse, then hiding again, then amplifying to greater strength than before. The stink then intensified so much that Chris knew that whoever was causing this gaseous commotion, had descended from passing wind to sharing solid matter with their underwear.

Chris checked the time on his phone and frowned. It seemed likely that everyone on the flight would be obliged to live through this for the next four hours and thirty minutes.

He remained standing, waiting for his fellow passengers to return.

The smell of the vomit rising from the floor began to mix with the merciless stench. This was joined by the aroma of airline cuisine, creating an orchestra of scents, all vying for attention.

Delicious bacon battled against half-digested food, wrestling with the stink of an open sewer drain.

Chris looked at the beautiful woman to his side, who had her pink pullover stretched over her nose. She smiled at him with her eyes and he grinned, shaking his head.

“Definitely didn’t expect this,” he said.

She continued to smile through her eyes and returned to the romantic comedy Chris could see she was watching on her screen.

“Really really sorry ‘bout this,” said Eadie who returned, accompanied by a member of the cabin crew—a slim woman in her forties with a profuse amount of foundation makeup on her face and overpowering perfume that seemed to disinfect the air around. Darren trudged behind with his head down and his face bright red.

“Excuse me sir,” said the cabin staff member. “Can I just get in there?”

“Sure,” said Chris as he stepped back, seeing she had a sponge and small, blue bucket of soap water in her hands.

Chris scanned the plane again.

He caught sight of a guy digging deep in his nose; an individual who was clearly using the vicious distraction of the anonymous gas donor to indulge his habits with great gratification.

Chris threw his hearing across to a couple; a man whose eyes had dark shadows underneath and a woman whose forehead vein was showing.

“Sure,” replied the man; the age forty-eight flashed in Chris’ mind. He could have been older, but good genes were maintaining his youthful visage.

“You’ve got to be healthy,” said the petite, tanned, blond woman who appeared considerably younger, but gave the impression that stress was ageing her. “Think about Eric. He’s your partner. Same age as you and keeping himself fit and strong. You better play when we get there. You promised.”

Chris smiled and continued to listen.

“I will,” said the man who breathed a sigh of submission.

“Good, good, it’s important.” Her words were so quick, it was as if they were trying to escape her mouth. “Remember what the doctor said about your heart. You need to make sure you’re getting plenty of exercise. You’ve always liked tennis, haven’t you?”

More of a statement than a question, Chris thought. He moved his gaze across to another individual on the opposite side of the plane, whose pale skin was almost green.

The man had one of his hands grasping his side, rubbing his ribs, then moving toward his stomach and darting back again to his ribs. He kept his head down and quickly looked to his right then back at his screen. He blinked rapidly, then looked up to his right as if something caught his interest. There was nothing above him, but the plane’s overhead lights and air conditioning. The man touched his face, rubbing his chin and lips, then his eyes dashed back and forth. Chris could just about see that the man’s forehead was glistening. The sickly-looking guy shook his head and wiped his mouth again.

Chris’ eyes widened.

It was him.

He was the one making this plane a toxic waste hazard.

Chris pressed his lips together. *Poor guy. How embarrassing.*

The smell of breakfast was beginning to conquer the stink and passengers’ loosened their hands from their faces.

“All sorted,” said the airline employee, who’d cleaned up the vomit.

“Thank you love,” said Eadie. “Come on Darren.”

The boy moved into the row to sit down and so did his mother, flashing a smile at Chris before he followed them.

Breakfast was now being served and Chris saw as the crew moved through the cabin placing down white trays, full of delicious wrapped treats. His stomach gurgled in response and he pulled down the seat-back tray-table in front of him.

A crew member passed two trays across Chris to Eadie and Darren, then placed one in front of him.

He began peeling the wrappers of each small plastic container, revealing portions of different foods. It was a full English breakfast with strawberries and kiwi segments on the side. He was into the toast and bacon quickly. Each tasty bite reminded him that he was actually on a plane travelling somewhere far away from everything he'd ever known. The meal also delivered comfort.

Things will be okay. This is life. People make big changes all the time. Things will be alright. It's all going to work out. This is what life is about. Travel. See things. Learn new things. Grow.

Chris brushed his hands and grinned inside himself.

It will all work out. It will all be fine.

The seat in front of him shoved back into his face, just missing his nose.

Chris tensed his jaw and looked at Eadie, who smiled. “That was close,” she said.

“Indeed,” said Chris with sufficient emphasis for the passenger in front to hear.

Finishing his meal, it was as if the air pollution absence had been granted solely

so everyone could enjoy their breakfast.

As the cabin crew collected empty trays, the smell of a rat's corpse sneaked in. The stench was bold, confident, and relentless, promising to make everyone spew this time.

"You have got to be bloody joking," shouted the same man, who by his voice might have possessed British aristocratic blood. "This is appalling!"

Some people laughed, but he was right. It was horrific, like entering a labourer's van who's gorged on copious egg and cheese sandwiches, and made his vehicle his own animal-litter-box.

Chris looked over to catch a glimpse of the guy's face, who he suspected was the culprit. The man kept his eyes firmly faced down.

Chris smiled and closed his eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to JFK New York, the local time is—"

Chris woke and unwound his joints to the sound of the stewardess' announcement.

"—for your safety and comfort, please remain seated with your seat-belt fastened until the Captain turns off the Fasten Seat-Belt sign. This will indicate that we have parked at the gate and that it is safe for you to move about. At this time, you may use your cellular phones if you wish. Please check around your seat for any personal belongings you may have brought on board with you and please use caution when opening the overhead bins, as heavy articles may have shifted around during the flight. If you require assistance, please remain in your seat until all other passengers have disembarked.

One of our crew members will then be pleased to assist you. On behalf of British Airways and the entire crew, I'd like to thank you for joining us on this trip and we are looking forward to seeing you on board again in the near future. Enjoy your stay."

"You were fast asleep, weren't ya?" said Eadie. "Big celebration last night was it?"

Chris rubbed his eyes. "No, just a few drinks with some friends."

"Probably best you slept," she continued. "That farting machine hasn't stopped them flapping out."

Chris breathed a chuckle and noticed an immigration form parked on his lap. Then, the familiar, putrid whiff, glided back in.

"Oh, wow. I see what you mean," said Chris widening his eyes.

"You see what I mean?" she said, nodding, laughing, and holding her nose. "Blimey!"

Chris looked around, noticing passenger camaraderie through nods, raised eyebrows, smiles, and shaking of the head—a shared ordeal; they'd survived the battle with pure sulphur, and were pleased it was over.

He pulled a pen from his jacket and filled out the immigration form quickly before disembarking commenced.

"Good luck on the islands Chris," said Eadie as passengers manoeuvred themselves to retrieve their bags. "All the best to ya."

"Thanks very much," said Chris. "All the best to you too."

Alighting from the plane and arriving in New York, the smell in the air was different from London; almost sweet, like fresh Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

In the huge, spacious, and high-tech airport, Chris knew from experiencing American flight security before to remain calm and collected, no matter how aggressive they appeared.

Reaching the head of the Arrivals queue, a muscled security-screening officer with a buzz haircut, wearing a short-sleeve shirt called him forward with the flick of his thick, vein-riddled forearm and chunky finger.

“Come on, we don’t have all day,” he said as Chris walked up to the security officer’s glass-protected booth that he was seated in.

“Hi,” said Chris.

“Passport, boarding pass, immigration form.”

“Sure.”

Chris handed him the documents.

“Reason for your stay?” demanded the militant-looking man as he continued surveying the documents that Chris had surrendered.

“I’m in transit.”

“Where are you headed?”

“The Pharisee Islands.”

“Where’s that?”

“North side of the Caribbean.”

“Never heard of it.” He looked Chris dead in the eye. “Where’s your next stop?”

“San Juan.”

It’s on my tickets, Chris thought, but knew better than to be cheeky to the man who could deny his new start at life.

“Put your fingers, then your thumb on the panel when I tell you to, then look at the camera—” he said and paused with a clear intention to ask another question. Chris waited for his signal and placed his fingers, then thumb on the green-lit panel of the booth. He looked at the camera that was facing him. “—and what’s your reason for travelling to the Pharisee Islands?”

“Work.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m going to be a bartender.”

“You mean you are a bartender.”

“No, I’m going to be a bartender. I’ve never been one before.”

The officer looked Chris in the eyes again, shrugged his lips, and nodded. “Why are you wearing a suit?” he continued as he reviewed something on his computer.

“I always wear a suit when I travel.”

“It’s a smart suit.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay Mr Charles. Enjoy your new life,” he said, smiling faintly, and handing back Chris’ documents. “Next!”

Entering the massive, busy airport, that reminded Chris of an exceptionally clean-looking mall, he used most of his six-hour connection time exploring the electronics and gadgets stores that captured his curiosity. He then headed to Check-In for his second flight to San Juan.

As he queued in the large line for a second round with the metal detectors, he noticed a smile on one of the airport security guy's faces, making eye contact with him.

The tall, thin guy chatted to his co-worker, who looked up with a serious face, scanned the queue, fixed his eyes on Chris, then whispered something back to his fellow employee.

It could have been something. Could have been nothing. But Chris had seen that exact type of smile before—one too many times. He prepared his mind for what he *knew* it meant.

The queue moved forward.

He watched as the tall guy strolled to another staff member and whispered something in her ear. She looked up, perused the queue, let her eyes fall on Chris, then whispered back to the guy. He chuckled.

Chris shook his head feeling defeat, rage, and frustration—*it was coming*.

The queue continued to advance.

Reaching the metal detectors, he placed his hand luggage on the conveyor belt leading his bag into the X-ray. He removed his belt, shoes, keys, wallet, London Oyster card, black Biro pen, and phone, putting them all in the grey tray provided, also for the X-ray.

The tall guy who had been smiling and whispering to his co-workers, was now stern, standing at the side of the metal detector portal.

As Chris passed through it, all the airport security staff in his vicinity glared at him. He counted six of them and they appeared to be in their mid to late twenties. Three of them allowed slight smiles to emerge on their faces.

The metal detector portal made no alarm or alert Chris could see, but he knew though. Something was about to happen.

They were going to get him, again, and he was going to have to deal with the consequences...uncontrollable consequences that had harassed him since he was a child.

He sighed.

The tall guy moved right in front of him, towering above. "Step to one side. Now!"

CHAPTER TWO

Black Hatred

Black Hatred

Wednesday, March 10, 5:02 p.m. (EST) – JFK Airport

When I was a child, my insides would crawl when my father would say, “I hate black people.”

Sometimes, it would be when we were in his car and a vehicle would cut him off in London traffic. He’d honk the horn and glare at the culpable motorist. If the aggressor were black, he’d mutter something like: “Typical black monkey. Can’t stand black people.”

Or perhaps we’d be at a huge family gathering.

If a black relative slipped an undermining comment about my father, maybe a cutting joke to make others chuckle, my dad would mumble under his breath, “Black people. Always black people.”

But today, I understand my father’s words clearly.

I hate black people, I thought, face-to-face with a tall black man.

The time-stopping, angry thought was accompanied by a tremor in my gut that shook my insides, blazing through my head like a gust of intense summer heat. My cheeks were set on fire with shame, guilt, and nausea.

The emotions were as ferocious as knowing the burning sensation on my skin when I’m too close to a bonfire.

I continued to frown at the man stood in front of me, who had pulled me out of the JFK Airport Check-In queue.

What's the issue now? What grief is this 'one' going to give me?

I looked to the other security personnel who were smiling.

What are 'they' up to?

I've never vocalised my hatred of black people; I'm disgusted by the very notion of it. But anger travelled through my veins as the tall guy stared at me in a manner I could only describe as, 'intending me harm.'

I mentally shook my head.

My father was born on the Caribbean island St. Kitts and at three years old was moved to the island Antigua. He was raised there by his aunt till he was twenty-one, then left for London and never looked back. It didn't paint the rosier picture of the Caribbean as he was extremely thankful to live in London. But weeks before I left the City, I'd asked him: "Are black people in the Caribbean any different from black people in London?"

"Yeah," he'd said, nodding his head to add weight to his answer. "They're more relaxed."

Even though I'd vacationed in the Caribbean before, I was aware I'd been treated with tourist hospitality with the sharp exception of the holiday to Jamaica...

My father's confirmation was needed to suppress my fears of living in a predominantly black country, but seeing the airport security surrounding me, provoked rage from old wounds. All of the employees were black and they were snickering at my expense.

"Stand right here," said the tall black guy in the common 'African American' New York accent I'd heard on US television shows. His teeth protruded but he was well-

groomed with a shaved head and the typical goatee that so many black American celebrities have. He ushered me over, not looking at me, and pointed toward a large glass box very similar to a futuristic prison I'd seen in science fiction films.

“Step inside, and sit,” he said, still not acknowledging me, but looking to the other two security personnel, who were grinning back at him. He handed me a red tray. “Place all your belongings here.”

I took my possessions out of the standard grey tray and moved them into the vivid red tray, which he snatched without looking at me.

I walked inside the large glass box, and sat on the white bench with no back, awaiting further instruction. He closed the door behind me and walked out of sight.

I was a prisoner as onlookers in the airport continued through security checks without issue, putting their bags on the conveyor belts of the X-ray machines.

The glass box was sufficiently isolated from the airport security queues to be conspicuous, and large enough to accommodate five average-size adult males with space to move.

Three dark-skinned airport security men and one woman—all in their mid-twenties, possibly thirties—stood at the sides of the glass box, smiling at their co-workers. Two of them walked up to each other and fist-bumped.

The staff continued looking in on me with wry grins as if other plane passengers queueing were a zero percent security risk; as if to say, *we've got our guy. The rest of you are free to go.*

I retained a blank facial expression, but my anger screamed of past pains.

The tall black guy who had chosen to pull me from the queue, entered the

glass box, and closed the door behind him.

Considering I'm six-foot, he was around six-foot three, a skinny build, and about my age.

"Okay!" he said with a tone that sounded like an attempt to be a drill instructor. "You have been selected for random screening! What I'm going to do, is search you with this!" He gestured toward his handheld metal detector wand. "I want you to sit down, and lift your feet up! One at a time! Is that understood?"

I nodded and sustained my expressionless face, eyes fixed dead on his.

"Do-you-understand?" he said with increased aggression, as if he was talking to an insolent child.

"Yeah," I muttered, continuing to nod. I watched my bag get raided by the others. Their hands dug deep, turning things over, mixing things around, opening items up, sniffing them like a bunch of monkeys with new toys.

Just got to let it happen, I thought. Let it happen.

I was six years old when I found out that being born with black skin was wrong.

In my school classroom, I sat surrounded by three of the prettiest white girls, amid twenty other pupils diligently getting on with their maths sums.

On my table that day, I heard words that would carve into my conscience for life.

"You're black. You must be dirty," said the blond, blue-eyed Canadian girl

called Talia. She prodded my forearm. "Didn't God clean you when He made you?"

With the finger she'd used to poke me, she pressed it into the table, and wiped it to get the filth off her skin.

Sitting in the centre of them, I looked at my 'colour,' wondering how I could clean the dirt off my body.

Why would God make me so dirty?

"The palms of your hands are white," the brunette girl named Jane said. "That's a start. It's just the rest of you. We can't touch you as we might get some on us. But we can touch your palms."

I felt relief that some part of me was normal—at least I had white on my hands, and my feet.

"Yeah," said Lexi, the other blond girl. She chuckled. Her head flicked to Jane. "Kiss him. I dare you."

"No, you kiss him," Jane replied.

I was the only black boy in the class among seven in the entire Victorian-looking, Church of England Primary School of two hundred and sixteen pupils.

The girls had kissed the other boys in my class because they were white, but they wouldn't touch me, because I was black...and I was dirty.

That night, with a white flannel in hand, I scrubbed my skin till my dark skin turned a ruby red, but the dirt wouldn't come off.

“Stand up! Is everything out of your pockets?” said the airport security guy.

“Yes,” I replied.

The staff outside the glass box continued to smile at each other, but didn’t make any eye contact with me.

I attempted to smile at them to share in the joke, but they kept their gaze between each other. When they met my eyes, they painted their faces with frowns, keeping me firmly excluded from their fun.

“Now, listen to my instructions!” said the security guy, still shouting. “I want you to raise your hands up! I’m going to scan you! I then want you to take several paces forward so I scan your back, and await further instructions! Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand.”

“Good! Now raise your arms!”

I lifted my arms and let his scanner peruse my limbs and torso.

As time moved on through my infant days, rejection from white children pushed me to seek kinship among other black kids. But this proved laughable...literally.

At age seven, I used to be dropped off at Battersea Park Playcentre—a place for children on school holidays from single parent households, or kids simply seeking

mischief. I fell in the former category. My parents were divorced and both had to work, which meant my younger brother, younger sister, and I needed supervision.

The playcentre bungalow—equipped with a pool table, pottery and arts room, and a lounge area—had a fierce odour that told me the boys hanging around were older.

Their faces were oily with large clusters of spots—some filled with pus at the head—and they were hulking in their huge bomber jackets and duffel coats, with hoods or side-ward baseball caps.

Daily, the same seven black teenagers huddled in the carpeted lounge section. Perched on tattered, stained couches and love-seats, they surrounded a gaming console and television. After many days standing behind their seating arrangement, watching them play their games, I mustered the courage to ask, “How do you do a Hadouken?”

I had watched the powerful karate character Ryu fire a ball of blue energy from his hands shouting, “Hadouken!” in the computer game Street Fighter II. But in asking the question, my voice sounded out of place, like it didn’t belong among the guys.

They ignored me.

I was compelled to amend my mother’s elocution lessons, dropping the pronunciation of consonants on my words.

“ ‘ow d’you do dat?” I repeated as I saw Ryu expel a blue fire ball again.

“You’re posh star. Push off, yeah?” one of them said and kissed his teeth.

“You’re not black. You sound like a little white boy.”

“He’s tryin’ to be like us dough, you get me,” another chimed in.

The laughter of the whole group that followed forced the truth. I wasn’t one of them, despite my dark skin colour. I wasn’t black.

One of the younger boys who was around my age, but lighter skinned with pupils that appeared colourless, tried to pick a fight, giggling and pushing me as the teenagers cheered him on.

“You’re just a white boy in black skin star, just a little white boy in black skin,” he kept repeating. “You think you’re tough dough, innit? D’you think you can fight star?”

“Get him Wayne!” the others shouted as they paused their computer game and turned around to see a real street fight.

I was quick to react.

I didn’t bother with a push. I emulated Street Fighter and punched him in the jaw.

“Ooooooh! Well done star,” the other boys hollered as the kid called Wayne ran out of the bungalow crying.

“You sparked ‘im raw blood!” another of the boys shouted. “Here, come n’ play da game with us.”

Joy shot up in me like a fountain.

Finally, I was welcomed in.

I was one of them.

I was black.

As I played the game, the other boys whispered and chuckled to each other

behind me. The name 'Marlow' kept breezing into my peripheral hearing.

"What's so funny?" I said, my voice still sounding out of place among their cooler, laid-back accents, slang words, and profanities.

"Nothing star," one of them replied. "Play da game innit."

"Is he coming down then?" mumbled another.

"Yeah, any minute bruv."

I paused the game and turned around, sensing that all the teenagers were laughing at me.

The biggest of the guys I'd ever seen stepped into the playcentre. His bloodshot eyes fixed on me. He had a thick, protruding bottom lip, a large nose, wore a huge anorak and heavy boots that thudded with each step. The creases around his eyes and on his forehead told me he could have been in his thirties, maybe even forties. He sniffed through his wrinkled nose and immediately stepped up toward me. He snatched the game controller out of my hands and took a seat next to me, pushing his leg right up against mine so I felt a pinch in my thigh.

"What's your name cuzz?" he said with his deep, lagging voice.

I didn't answer.

"Aint you got a name cuzz?" he said and smiled a grin of overcrowded teeth.

"Listen, play da game man. Don't be scared."

He threw the spare controller into my lap and allowed me to continue playing the game. The other boys sniggered.

"So I hear you punched out Wayne," he said. His tone appeared relaxed, like he approved.

I smiled. "Yeah," I replied, almost panting in relief and excitement. "I punched him in the jaw."

The other boys laughed and I joined them.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "You punched him in the jaw? Well done little man. Well done."

"Yeah, I punched him in the jaw," I repeated with more pride.

"You tough then bro?" His voice amplified. "Innit! You're real tough, aren't you bro? Right? Right?"

I smiled. "Yeah I—"

He grabbed my throat, his fingers gripping in between the tendons on my neck.

"Listen!" he shouted so close to me I could smell the stink of his body odour and breath all at once. "Listen good! Wayne's my bro. You get me. If a coconut like you hits him again, you know what I'm gonna do to you little man?" He shoved his forehead against my temple. "I said! Do you know what I'm gonna do to you little coconut?"

I squinted my eyes as his hot breath struck my pupils and spittle flew across my cheeks. The shouting and grip he had on my throat made my entire body tremble.

"Get out of 'ere coconut!" he bellowed. "And don't come back or I'm gonna bang you up!"

A few tears leaked from my eyes as the laughter of the black boys chased me out of the playcentre.

“I want you to step to the side here and wait!” said the security guy, insisting on talking to me like I had a hearing disability. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yeah, I understand you,” I replied, looking him square in the eyes.

He glared like he wanted to say more, then turned away.

From the back of his head, I could see he was smiling at the other security personnel; his cheeks gave him away. They responded with clear grins of their own.

I watched as they routed through the compartments of my wallet and pulled apart my mobile phone, examining behind the battery and SIM card holder.

At eight years old, Thaxton Playcentre in Hammersmith, London during school holidays introduced me to loads of black kids; a change from my predominantly white school.

The comments from black boys and girls never stopped.

“You’re too posh to be black.”

“You don’t dress black.”

“You got your haircut by a white man.”

“You’re not a real black man.”

“You’re a coconut.”

One day, a black guy and girl, both massively overweight in stature and emitting the stench of puberty's arrival, invited me to 'be their friend.'

It wasn't long before the two of them beat me up so badly, I almost blacked out.

The cries of my brother and sister got the playcentre coordinators' attention, but I always wondered; why did they pick me out of all the kids they could have selected?

And why did they suddenly turn on me?

There was no warning while we discussed WWF wrestlers on a bouncy castle-type feature; it was as simple as the two of them shouting, "Now!" then using me as a practice dummy for all the wrestling moves they'd seen on Cable TV.

"Where are you heading?" said the tall security guy.

"The Pharisee Islands," I said.

He nodded. "What's the reason for your travel?"

"I'm heading to work out there."

"What's your occupation?"

"I'm going to be a bartender."

He looked me in the eye, then back at the other security workers. They gripped their mouths and their cheeks puffed in restraint; likely because they wanted me to know that I was the butt of their joke.

I kept my face blank and unreadable.

At my local church Sunday School, two black boys—twin brothers—branded me with a name I'd heard many times already; a label that I would become further familiar with in my teenage years and early twenties.

"You're a coconut!" they exclaimed one day with a laughter that conceived unease. This came with no reasoning. It was said as randomly as a Russian Roulette gunshot to the head.

For plenty of Sundays after, it was my title.

What did it mean?

Why was I a coconut?

All I knew was that it was intended to hurt me, because of the laughter that would ensue afterwards.

At my secondary school, Belgravia College—a prestigious, huge red-brick private establishment for boys—four black guys in my year had taken to hurling insults at me daily.

I'd achieved a government paid-place to attend because my parents could never afford the fees, but because of the way I spoke, these black boys called me "posh" and "rich."

They would specifically joke about my haircuts. I never shaved my head as

low as they did and they found this hilarious, branding me with that name—coconut. The title evolved to Bounty like the chocolate, leaving me even more baffled about these names.

Ahmed Joseph, Jethro Godric-Beck, Jayden Ennin, and Marlon Noel couldn't hold the joke private for long.

I was thirteen when they explained it amid hyena-pack laughter on the school grounds.

The four of them paused, holding their faces to control their chuckling.

Jethro put his hand on my shoulder. "You're black on the outside and white on the inside, innit," he said with a mock-sympathetic tone before the group of them burst into further fits of laughter.

So that's what it meant.

While in a Religious Studies class, as the teacher turned his back to write on the board, I asked Ahmed and Marlon about Jethro, who seemed to detest me even more than the others did.

"Can't we all just get along?" I whispered to them at my side. "I mean, why does Jethro do it? Why does he keep bothering me all the time? I never did anything to him."

I was met with an impossible answer; a titanium wall where you're sealed in on all sides to endure, and die. "Jethro just hates you," said Ahmed.

They smiled, hands over mouths, and then released a torrent of quietened chuckling.

Almost every, single, school day for six years, they would continue ripping on

me—mainly for my haircuts, the way I spoke, and for not being ‘black’ enough. Every single school day...

At fifteen years old, a holiday on an American cruise liner in Florida—a one-off surprise vacation that my mother had spent years saving up for to surprise us—showed there was no international exemption; black people in the States were just the same as black people in London.

Making friends with a group of guys on the ship, two boys within the group interrogated me about ‘chatting-up’ girls as we sat in the lobby of the opulent-looking cruise-liner.

I had no confidence in myself...none at all. I didn’t know how to talk to girls, but that offered me no mercy.

“Where’s your game England?” two of the guys kept repeating. “Where’s your game?”

They’d nicknamed me England because of my voice.

Pointing at me and referencing the fact that I didn’t know how to talk to girls, the one called Tarik began to go around the circle of guys present.

“Don’s got game. Eric’s got game. Rick’s got game. Even your little brother’s got game. But where’s your game England? Where’s your game?”

All of us were black boys, Rick was English, and my brother had managed to dodge the assault. So, what made me special? Really? What? Why did Tarik and Eric choose me to assault? What had I done to draw this attention?

When I was sixteen, sat in the sauna of my local sports centre, a twenty-two-year-old Brazilian bodybuilder said something that provoked both my disgust and agreement at the same time.

“I like black people, but I can’t stand—” He used the word that colonial masters had utilised to keep their slaves in check. The same word unnecessarily proclaimed by Hip-Hop artists in abundance.

“What?” I replied in surprise.

“He means black people that act out aggressive, rude, and ignorant,” said a black lady sat in the room with us.

On another occasion in the sauna, after a long conversation with an elderly Indian woman, she said to me, “I knew you were different. When I saw you, I knew you weren’t like them. I could tell.”

I was aware of exactly what she meant. There was a clear stereotype of what London black youth were, stemming from American Hip Hop culture. London black guys were tagged the name rude-boys. They were rough and ready, uneducated and proud of it, dressing to represent ghetto-life with long key-chains and over-sized basketball shirts, tracksuit bottoms hanging around their rear, speaking slang with arrogance, and gladly disrespecting women.

I didn’t match this image.

At nineteen, an incident with a guy called Mattox at my sports centre left me seething for years. I’d exercised and trained in martial arts so that if a physical altercation ever occurred with one of these specific types of aggressors—namely a black guy giving

me grief for no apparent reason—I would be able to handle myself.

With Mattox, I was given a chance to prove what I'd learnt.

Mattox, a twenty four year old who was as dark as charcoal, regularly approached me in the gym.

“You're getting big bro,” he would say as he pressed and caressed my arms.

“Yeah, real big bro,” he continued.

“Thanks Mattox,” I said, letting my eyes recede. His voice was eerily light and didn't match the well-defined, masculine build he had. He was slightly shorter than me, but nothing could have prepared me for his 'other persona.'

He invited me to an underground nightclub in Soho.

When we met up, he seemed different.

His friends—five other black guys—seemed miserable and unfriendly, as did he.

. I'd tried to speak to Mattox about the gym and training, but he seemed completely oblivious. After twenty minutes, I left the nightclub feeling unwelcome and despised by his friends as they hadn't even been able to greet me, let alone speak to me.

A few days later, I saw Mattox in the sports centre as I was leaving the changing rooms.

“We need to talk,” he said sternly.

I returned his firm tone. “Yeah. We do.”

I left, feeling jarred by the audacity of his aggressive demeanour—why would he be upset?

The following day, after my regular gym workout, I got changed into my swim-trunks and entered the steam room, lying down on the hard, marble slab.

Minutes passed and the door was opened wide with force, seeping much of the steam out of the room.

“So that’s how it is, is it?” said Mattox as he stormed in. “No love for Mattox!”

“No. It’s not like that at all,” I calmly replied, still lying down.

“So, what’s happening then bro?” He plonked himself down on the slab in front of me, splashing water in all directions as his rear hit the seating.

“Nothing.”

“You gotta understand. The way I am outside and the way I am in the gym, it’s different. Those are my boys from the streets, you get me? When I’m in the gym, it’s the gym, but when I’m on the streets, it’s business, you get me?”

“I don’t get it Mattox. I don’t get it at all.”

“You were showing me too much love and too much respect in the club bro. Can’t be going on like that with my boys. I’m a different guy when I’m out there. It’s business bro.”

“Sorry Mattox. I don’t get it. I was glad to see you. I don’t understand how that’s showing too much love and too much respect. You’re not making any sense.”

“Okay. Listen bro. Let’s squash this before it turns into a beef, yeah? You did me wrong. I did you wrong. Let’s squash this. You say sorry for what you did. And I say sorry for what I did.”

“What?” I replied. I looked at him as if I was seeing him for the first time. He was embodying the stereotypical London black rude-boy—full of aggression. The

kind of guy I despised so much.

Had he lost his mind? Was I missing something here? What had I done? It's not like I'd gotten drunk and forgotten. The club atmosphere had been so hostile that I didn't want to drink or stay.

"That's crazy," I continued. "Let's just leave it, okay?"

I got up, left the steam room, and sat down on the lowest level of seating inside the sauna room.

Seconds later, Mattox burst in.

"Don't go on like a pussy!" he said as he took a seat at the top level of the sauna.

"I don't want to talk about this."

"Look at you, puffing your chest like you're Superman."

"Mattox, I'm not puffing my chest like I'm Superman."

"Look! I tell you what, you wanna squash this? We'll finish it outside!"

"What?" I stared at him. "What do you mean outside?"

"Outside blood!" he shouted and then quietened his voice, putting his hands up as if telling an invisible friend to behave. "I just wanna talk to you outside," he said very calmly.

"What do you mean 'talk outside?'"

"I mean talk outside. You and I need to squash this beef like men. Or do you think you're better than me? Too much to talk to me outside? Can't give me that time?"

My mouth hung open in sheer shock. "Have you lost your mind mate?"

“What? Look, we’re gonna talk outside now, come on.” He stepped down from the top level of the sauna.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

I left the sauna and Mattox followed me out, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s step outside, come on. We’re just gonna talk, that’s all.”

I shook his hand from my shoulder. “Okay. Fine. Let’s talk.”

“Yeah, we’re just gonna talk, just gonna talk.” He was shaking his head around as if loosening his neck, ready for exercise.

In our swim-trunks, we both stepped out of the changing rooms into the corridor of the centre, and parked ourselves in a small alcove beside a fire-exit where nobody was around.

Mattox reached his hand out and grabbed me by the throat.

“Now listen here and listen good,” he said. “Who are you to talk to me like dis? D’you think you’re bad? D’you think your bad? I should clock you in the jaw right now you know.”

“You’ve gone mad mate,” I said as I wrestled his hand from my neck. “You’ve gone absolutely insane.”

“Yeah? Yeah? What? You think I’m mad? You think I’m mad? You think you’re some kind of Superman, with your big chest.”

Two young, average-built passers-by intervened. “Break it up lads!” the guys said.

I walked back toward the changing rooms and Mattox, who broke free of the guys’ hold, gave chase, running up and punching me in the chest. The bystanders

watched in surprise.

I stood firm, feeling his frustration breathing off as I towered above him.

“Hm,” I mumbled. His punch had felt like a tap.

“What? You think you’re a big man, do you? Do you? Do you?”

Walking back into the changing rooms, I shook my head as I retrieved my bag from the locker, ready to get changed and leave.

He followed after me and slapped my face. “Think you’re still bad bro? Watch how I get my boys down here! They be punching bag day n’ night blood! They will bang you up!” he shouted and sped toward his own locker.

“Wow...that’s strike two,” I muttered.

“What?” he screamed. “Strike two? Strike two? Strike two?”

He dashed his sweat-drenched gym vest toward me and I dodged, pitching my locker key in his direction.

He rushed at me. I squared my stance and raised my fists.

He wrapped his arms around the backs of my legs, trying to lift me off the ground, unable to do so.

I saw my chance; a few seconds of slow motion as if my decision would be a life-changing event; drop an elbow clean in the spinal cord of his back and put him out quickly. But I knew in those seconds, if I did it, he would come back with his boys, and possibly with a knife. He was the type. He’d shown me that much.

The thoughts flew through my head. I decided to take a fall.

He stood over me. “There! You see! Who’s the man? Who’s the man? You’re nothing but a little pussy. You ain’t no real black man. You’re nothing! But you think

you're all that with your big chest. You're nothing!"

He got changed and was shouting loud as bystanders witnessed. "Outside! I'm gonna get you outside! We're gonna finish this!"

Before long, he was gone.

Getting changed, I phoned my mother to pick me up.

He wasn't waiting for me outside and I never saw him again.

I heard he was banned from the sports centre, but the situation left an echo in my mind for life: "you ain't no real black man!"

For years after, I dwelt on it, absolutely livid and savagely humiliated. I'd had to call my mother...my mother!

What if I'd just dropped an elbow in the centre of his back for all the scumbag black guys that had given me grief over the years? All the black 'rude-boys' who had given me so much trouble. How much relief would I've been granted from my past?

What if I'd quelled all that built-up rage with one brutal blow to his spine? The freedom it would have allowed me...

But I'd let it go and a decade of fury against black people had been compounded with more rage in this single even, pushing my wrath to overflowing. It left a gaping void in my soul, like some form of silent abyss sucking away confidence, contentment, and solidarity that would only be erased by breaking a black man's jaw and beating him within an inch of his life.

More concealed anger, and increased shame arose.

In the same year, I had one of the best dates of my life with a beautiful girl from

Spain—Isabella Lopez.

I'd shown her around Central London's night scene, seeing an outdoor film at Embankment, riding the London Eye above the Thames river and the exquisite view of parliament, and danced at a trendy bar in the social hub of Covent Garden's square. It was the closest thing I'd felt to love in my life and I was elevated in a way I'd never experienced.

On the night bus journey returning home, we went upstairs and sat at the back to be alone.

Two men looking to be in their forties, climbed to the top floor of the bus; a black guy and a white guy with beer bottles in their hands. The black guy spotted me before I could retract my gaze. I recognised those harmful eyes; eyes that whispered to me of a 'constant' that would follow me forever; this guy meant me grief.

The black guy took the lead and stormed to the back of the empty bus to sit next to us, goading me, asking me questions about my origins, saying I wasn't good enough for the girl I was with.

We hadn't given him any invite or indication of any kind that we wanted their company, but here they were; two grown men with nothing better to do.

"You think you're nice though, don't you?" said the black guy, continuing his disparaging line of questioning. "Think you're all that. This girl's too good for you."

The white guy wasn't paying attention, but sniggered at the right times to act as if he were.

It was the black guy who was really interested in pursuing his attempt at provocation. It triggered my father's words to resonate in my mind: "Black people.

Always black people.”

I would find that other black people in my life couldn't stand me; at night clubs and bars, walking the street passing a group of black guys—something would be said, perhaps a little laughter, or worse, a full-blown confrontation. It was a certainty.

Black girls said similar comments about me.

“Coconut.”

“Bounty.”

“You're not really black.”

They went further, making the assumption, “you only go for white women.”

Not a question. A statement. It destroyed my attraction to my own race.

The compliments that came off the back of my ostracism from my race, arrived in a twisted way throughout my teenage years and beyond, similar to what the Indian woman had said to me in the sauna.

In university, a Caucasian house-mate who'd been raised in the English countryside said to her friends, “We don't see him as black. Do we?”

I was standing right beside them as she made this comment; supposedly, a compliment...

Other girls of various races had said, “I don't usually find black men attractive, but there's something different about you.”

A warped pride grew out of the uniqueness I was branded with in these ‘compliments.’ None of this was healthy and I knew it, but it was a roller-coaster of wounds that was out of control.

I was an outsider to black people; my race. And the gap was filled with hate and contorted pride.

The tall guy left and he sent the female security staff member into the glass box. All of them were still giggling.

“Okay sir, are you alright?” she said.

“Yep, have to be, right?”

“So where are you travelling to?”

“The Pharisee Islands.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. If you could please replace everything in your bag, you’re free to go.”

“Sure,” I said. I stepped out the glass box and walked towards the table where my bag and belongings were strewn. I began putting my items back in my bag and pockets.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“Yeah, of course,” I replied. “I feel like I’ve been abused, but that’s all.”

She laughed. The tall guy did not.

“Maybe lightly verbally abused,” she said.

”Yeah. I understand that it’s procedure though, so I’m okay. But, I do have to ask one thing. This isn’t random, is it?”

She smiled. “We have to tell everyone they’re random.”

“Please, just be honest. It isn't, is it?”

“Well, it's not because your black if that's—”

“No, no, no,” I said, putting aside my mental-trip down black-on-black hatred lane. “That's not what I'm thinking.”

“Oh, that's what most black men say when they get called in.”

She was so far from the point, but explaining my history with black people would not be a good idea.

“No,” I said. “In fact, I was wondering if maybe it was because I'm wearing this suit.” It was a truthful query. I'd often wondered if dressing smartly for flights made one a suspect.

“Why would it be because of your suit?” she questioned. “I think you look good. You're very well-dressed.”

“Thanks, I just thought maybe I'm considered a drug dealer or something.”

She laughed. “Well, you're the best dressed drug dealer I've seen. What's a handsome guy like yourself travelling alone for anyway?”

I grinned.

“See, that's better,” she said. “You have a really nice smile. Next time, try not to be so serious. Oh, and in answer to your question, it isn't random, but I can't tell you the criteria. I'm not authorised. Sorry.”

“That's understandable,” I replied. “At least you're honest.”

I picked up my bag. “Thanks very much,” I said, addressing her. “And thank you,” I added, looking the tall guy in the eye.

He nodded, maintaining a serious face, then turned back to his friends to

laugh.

She looked at my passport again and handed it back.

“Thank you very much for your cooperation Christopher Charles,” she said with a grin.

“Thank you,” I said.

I walked through into the waiting area for my next flight to San Juan and shoved the bitterness from my mind.

I'm going to the Caribbean, I thought. Paradise. Things are going to be much better. Black people will be nicer and more relaxed there. There's nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about at all.

CHAPTER THREE

A New Beginning

A New Beginning

Wednesday, March 10, 10:47 p.m. (AST) – San Juan Airport

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

The four-hour flight from JFK to 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 his home city, but he would take the opportunity in this tropical heaven.

The most exciting prospect was to meet a beautiful woman to share his island experience with, travelling the isles together, strolling hand-in-hand down the many beaches with the intoxicating sunset in the background. He’d never had a girlfriend, so the vision of meeting someone in such a pleasant setting was exhilarating.

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. Maybe even try jet skiing or wake-boarding? Then, enjoy the

popular resorts around, the multitude of beach bars, and the five-star spas. He could do anything!

So many possibilities; so many adventures. So much good time to spend; start really enjoying life like never before.

If he desired, he could 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 shivered 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. Additionally, he put his flight documents in the tray too.

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 the glass cabinet. People peered at him like an exotic, endangered species caged at 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. “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, the airport 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 thirties and forties, who were questioned about their reason for entry, while a few local residents in their forties and fifties passed through a separate security line with no challenge.

“Next one, step up!” said the greying dark-skinned immigration officer who wore a uniform comprised of a dark blue short-sleeve shirt, and brown trousers. He was sat in a small booth labelled *Non-Belongers* while the local island residents had passed by a booth titled *Belongers*.

To hear the Caribbean accent on the officer 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 far beyond 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 also 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,” replied Chris. “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. Cedrick!” he shouted as his eyes scanned Chris’ medical documents.

The immigration officer called Cedrick walked over. Also dressed in the same uniform, he was possibly a little younger than the seated officer, but had shaved his head so that the grey of his age wasn’t evident.

“Is this right?” he mumbled to the man that had joined them.

Cedrick reviewed Chris’ medial papers, looked at Chris, then appeared to examine the documents more intensely. He scowled at Chris 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 Cedrick. “You’re being very immature.”

Chris went silent. *Really strange choice of words*, he thought. *You’re being very immature?*

He maintained his composure, knowing these men had the power to send him straight back to the UK, no questions.

The first time he'd visited 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 his doctor ticking a specific box on one of his forms for his Work Permit. This is why Chris had gone the distance and asked for extra medical tests with his GP—to show his full submission to PI laws.

"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 as fears began to permeate his mind. Will they be able to send it 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?" said Chris.

The immigration officer's glare intensified.

"Cedrick, get the supervisor," he said.

Cedrick strolled toward a door behind the red line that separated the booth from 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 even going to look at the papers? Chris thought, but remained quiet.

The warnings he'd been granted by multiple seasoned travellers, re-emerged in his mind. He remembered the general consensus very well: *Do not mess with Pharisee Islands Immigration! They are literally the worst in the world and will send you back to where you came from if they wish.*

Chris felt like his new life 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—what they would call welfare cheques—the endless job searching, his fast financial decline, the weekends boozing off the remnants of his credit card to numb the reality, the dizzying fury and abysmal depression, 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. “Or you have to return to

where you came from. Go on 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 lining 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 morning 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,” he continued, letting his voice smoothly transition from calm to firm.

“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.”

“Yeah. 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 chin fall to his chest. “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, Mortigno was shaped so that a sky-view would see a main road lining the outside of the isle and the mountain countryside dominating the centre. Winding roads would be seen cutting through the centre of the greenery.

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

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

As they proceeded, the roads turned to 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?”

Smiling, 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 Saul's troublesome demeanour, when they'd spoken, he'd assured Chris he'd keep an eye out for writing opportunities should Chris ever return to the islands.

“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 fiduciaries and law firms maintained a conservative look, while other retailers were painted pink, orange, sky blue, or yellow.

Each establishment—whether a medical 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. The Governor was a person appointed by the British to oversee the PI, but the Premier was the head of Government position that the islanders voted for.

As Chris recalled, 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 or government.

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

Chris looked down the slope to see an unimpeded view of the perfect ocean and other PI isles 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 with one of Chris’ suitcases and unlocked it. Chris followed in, wheeling his other 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. He passed through the dining room with another dining table, although this one was more elegantly poised with a cream throw-cover, intricately designed with floral patterns 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 an image of his mother, sister, brother and him. He felt his stomach punch out and his eyes well-up. He wouldn't be seeing them again for a very long time.

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 black covers as well a matching floor-rug with two of the ferocious big-cats decorating it. 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 bag, 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 actually 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.

Discarding the ill-thoughts of the deliberate vandalism, Chris 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. It was Saul.

“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 and Founder 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 good afternoon.”

Chris smiled. He picked up the phone and made the return 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 journalist 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, but the title of the occupation sounded phenomenal.

“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.”

Saul sounded like he was overselling, but it didn’t matter.

“Okay,” said Chris. “Great. Well, uh. I suppose I’ll see you very soon.”

“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 not just any name. It was ringing fire alarm bells in the deepest parts of Chris' soul 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?

CHAPTER FOUR

Unwanted Reunion

Unwanted Reunion

Thursday, March 11, 11:44 a.m. – Uncle Vernon's Villa

To work for a psychopath nine to five, is like being tied to a chair with a foaming Pitbull Terrier chained up in front of you. The chain restrains the canine from tearing out your throat, but allows the dog enough freedom to bark in your face, teeth bared, hot stinking breath filling your airways, spittle flying across your eyes and lips.

You get to live, but you slowly suffocate in the terror, minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour, day-to-day.

The vivid imagery emerged in my mind as I continued to think on the name *Jacob Cain*. Like a piece of food lodged between two back teeth, I was unable to reach the memory of who this man was. All I knew was that his name was sending a chill through my body and provoking a plethora of negative thoughts, murdering the optimism I'd experienced a few minutes before.

Seconds after the phone call with Saul, Vernon had come into the dining room and explained he'd already organised a meeting with Jacob Cain, confirming what Saul had said. The meeting was at Five O' Clock Somewhere Beach Resort—the location of my new bartending job.

From the last time I was visiting the Pharisee Islands, uncle Vernon had known that my primary vocation was writing. I was grateful he was able to facilitate the meeting when Saul had contacted him about the job role while I was in London. Going to Five O' Clock Somewhere also meant I could talk to my new manager and

let him know I was ready to work, while being interviewed for this secondary job. I was elated, but also apprehensive.

Would I be permitted, let alone able to work two jobs?

I would have to work double shifts because I couldn't drop my bartending job at Fives for the journalist role. Bartending was the reason I was allowed into the country to work and such an exchange of occupations would mean having to exit the country again to process me—I couldn't afford it nor would ever entertain it. London was behind me now

I calmed the anxiety by swiftly telling myself I could do day shifts as a journalist and nights as a bartender—if I got the job.

But there was another issue, which felt deeply more unnerving than if my new manager and the Labour Department would allow a second occupation. As I unpacked my clothes into the walk-in wardrobe and chest of drawers of my new bedroom, I considered my potential role as a journalist for SINN. The name *Jacob Cain* maintained a haze of trepidation, silently throttling any excitement I could have. It drew my thoughts to unpleasant work experiences with unsavoury people; people with no conscience for others—psychopaths, hedonists, narcissists, and megalomaniacs; those rare occasions when I'd met someone who I sincerely believed didn't care for anybody.

Why was I thinking about this? And why did Jacob Cain's name keep resurrecting a specific memory of one of the most manipulative work experiences I'd ever had?

In this oppressive job, I'd endured a manager who I believed qualified for the

title psychopath.

That was six years ago and the memory was still sharp.

I was nineteen and it was the third of eight occupations I've held in my life.

Taking a year out from academics, the job was at a software retailer called Easyware on the busy and famous Kings Road in London.

Everything about the store was wrong.

The CEO had emulated the concept of creating PC and Mac software within the store from his trips abroad. The innovation of it for the UK sounded impressive. From the small range of titles, a machine within the store would burn software onto disc right before the customer's eyes, then print the label on the disc, and print the inlay for the disc's box.

We took sales face-to-face, over the phone, and online. But, one of the company's big issues was the store location. Being on the Kings Road—a place renowned for fashionable, overpriced clothing and shoes—wasn't ideal. On top of this, the store concept manifested as a cumbersome process riddled with system errors that would lose us sales.

Most of the time, the store was empty, but this did not present a pleasant scenario when working with my manager Draco.

As far as I could assess, Draco was a psychopath. What made the situation more personal was that he was also the only black man I'd ever worked for,

supporting my contempt for my own race.

Draco's behaviour translated horribly in my angry mind: give a black man power Christopher and this is what you get—a psychopath.

Draco was a twenty-seven year old Jamaican man. His voice sounded slightly high, almost feminine in its lightness.

One Saturday, after proclaiming with unwavering sincerity that he would be “the next billionaire Bill Gates,” he proudly told a story, not looking at me, but at his mobile phone as he typed away.

“I knew of a farmer back in my country,” he said, his tall, lanky form almost drooping over his phone. His blue pullover—which was our uniform—hung from his skinny shoulders.

“He would hire people,” continued Draco, “say three or four workers to help maintain his farm, but after a short time, maybe a few weeks, he would fire the entire workforce. He would then hire some more people to replace them, again three or four guys. After a few weeks, he would fire them too. He then hired some more people to replace the ones who were last out the door. He would then fire them. You see, this farmer wanted the best from his workers. He wanted them working fast, hard, always giving one hundred and ten percent.”

He paused, taking a long breath as if to intentionally create suspense. His focus remained on his phone. “But he knew once the workers got comfortable, they wouldn't be working so hard anymore. The farmer didn't want that. You see Chris, people work best when they don't know what's coming. They work best when they know there's no security. That farmer was smart. He kept his workforce at optimum

efficiency. You need to ask yourself, is your place here? Are you giving your best?

You need to consider, are you working at optimum efficiency?"

Up to that point, every day I'd entered the store to work, I'd felt it could be my last.

Sometimes Draco would whisper, "Head Office have been talking. I can't tell you what they've said, but you've got to be careful," or perhaps a firm word. "Sales have been really low Chris. Really low. It's not looking good at all. Just a little friendly advice, keep your CV updated and on hand."

Following months of tolerating Draco's management methods, the story about the farmer reached the peak of my patience.

"Draco. I need to talk to you," I said at the end of the workday after his 'farmer speech.' We'd already locked up the shop front and were tallying up the till float.

"Sure," said Draco. He walked into the tiny storeroom adjacent to the small, carpeted shop floor of the software store.

"Draco, I'm sorry to tell you this," I said. "But—" I sighed. "I think it's time I moved on."

"O-kayyyyy," he replied, nodding once and staring at me.

"I'm simply considering what you've said." I paused. "I don't think my place is here so, I just think it's time I moved on."

He took a good thirty seconds, calculating his next words.

"Now Chris," he said. "I want you to think about this. Are you sure you want to quit?"

"Not really." I sighed again. "But after what you said about the farmer. I don't

work like that. It's off Draco. It's really off. Fear? Working by fear? It's really not the way. I mean. I work hard here and do everything I can. We all know this location is not the best spot for a software store." I released a nervous chuckle of disapproval. "I'm sorry. That talk about the farmer was just too much."

"Now, I think you may have taken what I said a little out of context."

"Come on Draco. I didn't take it out of context. It was pretty clear what you were saying."

"No. No. Chris." He looked away from me, picked up a piece of PC software about financial management from the desk, and looked as if he were suddenly engrossed by blurb on the back, completely zoning out from our conversation.

"You're one of my best workers here," he said, comparing me to three other staff members who weren't present.

"I think you should go home, and think about it," continued Draco. "And let me know what you decide."

"Okay." I stared at him for a second. Not glared. "Okay, I'll think about it."

I returned the next day and told Draco I'd be staying.

Two weeks later, Draco resigned and a new manager replaced him.

Throughout my CV, I didn't have any other employers that I felt fit the profile of a psychopath: a human with no empathy.

In all my other jobs, I'd either been promoted or asked to stay when the time came for me to move on. The only occupation I quit was as an administrator, conducting fund-disinvestments for an investment solutions firm.

I was twenty-two and acquired the role straight after University, but following four months, I simply had to escape. It had been nothing but nine to five, working a job that had no prospects, consistent drunken nights on Fridays and Saturdays, and lots of inter-office flings.

It wasn't the world for me.

One man on our team—David Edward Lindsey-Ashcroft, Caucasian, early thirties, skinny with a receding hair line—approached me in the open plan office space.

Amid forty people tapping away at their computers in cubicles reaching desk height, he made a judgement-call that stayed in my mind.

David had passed a few greetings to me here and there, but it didn't prepare me for his words.

“Look around you Chris,” he said, touching his glasses, and rearranging his tie. “Look at them.” He scanned the office, not glancing at people, but through them with an expression as if a putrid odour emerged from each person.

“We're not like these people,” he continued. “We're different. Do you think that these people read the Financial Times? The Telegraph? Hmm?”

He turned to me, then continued examining the staff members. “No. Not these people,” he said. “More likely The Sun or The Mail. We're different from them.”

All I could do was smile.

“Keep your head up Chris,” he said and walked on through the office to his desk.

It was as if he'd picked up on my discomfort with the social scene of the office,

though my thoughts were not as openly condemning as his. The certainty was that the environment wasn't for me. I quit the job to my manager's surprise. He asked me to stay and offered a higher salary, but I knew.

It just wasn't the work or social life that I desired.

The distraction in my thoughts about Draco and diversion to the financial investment solutions job, returned me to the new occupation being proposed—News Director and Marketing Executive of online News site SINN.

I was seeing the proof of all the new-age, life-coaching, motivational business books that I'd read. They professed: "go out and be your best! Think positive! Take risks! Shoot for the moon! Change your surroundings! Transform your lifestyle! Exude good thoughts, then, good situations and people will be attracted to you!"

This was really happening and seemed too perfect to be true. Good things never happened to me, yet I had taken a huge risk in starting again. I had 'shot for the moon' in moving from cold London to the tropics of the Caribbean.

Continuing to unpack my clothing from both suitcases, I put my stained white jumper into a plastic bag for disposal, shaking my head at the black shoe polish smear. I discarded the irritation and returned to the present. *To be a journalist for the first time would be incredible.*

Still, being unable to remember why the name *Jacob Cain* sounded awful, was perplexing.

The previous year, I'd lived in Mortigno of the Pharisee Islands for two months—November and December—getting a good feel of what it would be like to reside in the Caribbean.

The extended vacation had allowed me to meet many people—I was sure one of them had been Jacob Cain.

Jacob Cain? Jacob Cain?

Yet again, I disregarded the dark, thick fog that filled my head and my mind moved to my uncle, who seemed more distant than his usual self; almost as though he didn't want me there. I saw it in his shorter sentences, lack of conversation on the way from the airport, and eye-contact avoidance.

Perhaps it was because he was assuming responsibility over increasingly dangerous criminal cases on the island?

Or maybe it was due to his role being under fierce oppression?

No Pharisee Islander liked an outsider undertaking the task of Police Commissioner—I'd learnt that while I was on the islands the last time.

My uncle being Jamaican-born made him an outsider—officially termed a Non-Belonger; the people of the PI would have preferred a Belonger.

In an email he'd sent in January while I was in London, he'd mentioned that on my return to the islands, my family connection to him had to be kept quiet. He explained potential reprisals—angry criminals going through the process, annoyed ex-cons released from prison, disgruntled family and friends of the convicts. In coming to live in the Pharisee Islands, I had to be more cautious as opposed to when I was here on a long holiday.

I wondered if it affected the original proposal. Part of the attractive idea of Pharisee Islands' residency, was that I would live rent and bills free at Vernon's villa as Vernon worked away from home a lot. The offer had come right on point of my twenty-fifth birthday, falling in line with *the* vow I'd made when I was fifteen.

Without control, my memories revisited the previous year when I made the decision.

"If things aren't working out in London in ten years' time, I'll leave the country," was the vow at fifteen years old.

It shocked friends and family alike when I said, "I'm leaving the country forever. I'm never coming back to live here." But I meant it.

London was dead to me.

No one had anticipated I would make such a drastic move, but what they didn't comprehend was the pain inside—a deep well of anger, hatred, sadness, and depression that had been growing for a very long time.

At seven years old, my parents had divorced and from around that point, I held the dream of meeting the perfect woman at University, getting married, and having a flawless, unbreakable, faithful family by the time I was twenty-seven.

The vow of leaving the country hadn't sprung out of thin air. It had arrived at fifteen, when I reached a trough of sorrow from attending a single-sex private school that I detested. A full seven years—aged eleven to eighteen—in a strict academic

establishment with no girls, was akin to being in prison.

Exeter University was the light at the end of the tunnel—I would meet my dream woman and all would be well. It was such a simple dream, that had gained huge strength year upon year.

I recall walking home from the last pub social of my final day at University, entering my bedroom, locking the door, and letting every bit of pain spill out of me in one, long, deep cry. I had no idea why I was crying at the time and it was so sudden. But a year later, I realised. The simple dream of an eight year old having a family of his own, hadn't come true and I'd really, really, really trusted in it. Fully invested. Believed in it like a child believing in Father Christmas.

But like that shocking moment when I discovered that the fun, jolly, loving Father Christmas wasn't real, so I understood that I was never going to have the woman of my dreams. It was a childish lie. A gamble. And similar to the death-wish of a gambler putting his lifesavings, his hoard, his precious earnings on thirty-one black and it coming up thirty-two red, so I felt it was an end to everything I held dear.

I couldn't shake the feeling of hopelessness.

I'd lost it all.

Everything gone.

The light at the end of the tunnel, had been an oncoming train, and it had smashed every ounce of life out of me. A dream so simple had morphed from a great future into a mammoth, trampling me underneath.

I lost all self-confidence after University.

Anytime I looked in the mirror, a voice in my head would whisper "you're ugly.

You're dirty. You're never going to meet the right woman. Your chance is over.

University is over."

In attempting to keep the dream alive and be a good man for the perfect woman I'd one day marry, I remained celibate for the entire year after University. It wasn't planned—it just happened because I feared losing the last tiny thing I had; morality.

I still sought the unblemished, idyllic woman of my dreams and my moral code was part of earning the right to her perfection. I believed one-night rendezvous' were plain wrong, so I didn't make the 'moves.' But, in my self-righteous celibacy, my confidence fell into minus degrees.

A year later, my mother orchestrated a debt-mounting, surprise family vacation with my brother and sister on a Florida cruise liner—a second one. But this seemingly great gift that was far outside my mother's financial means, invited a new sensation I'd ignorantly thought would never happen to me.

The concept of betrayal.

I met an American girl called Arianna Lane—the girl in the red dress. She'd looked amazing in that dress, but the two-week holiday had been awkward.

My confidence was at an all-time low and Arianna had shown an attraction to me I couldn't understand.

My abysmal self-esteem put me in a place of compromise, because despite her beauty, I knew that her personality didn't meet my preferences.

It was words and sentences that revealed she didn't really care; not the way I would wish a prospective long-term partner to care.

Or the way she jokingly instructed me to respond to her statement: “I bet you get a lot of girls digging you,” she said.

“Nah, I don’t know,” I replied.

“Nooo,” she said, giggling. “You don’t say that. You say, ‘Arianna. Of course I do because I’m hot!’”

I scrunched my face. “Sure Arianna,” I mumbled. “Of course I do because I’m hot.”

“There you go,” she said, compelling me to silence—I didn’t like that exchange at all.

Then there was the way she absorbed her best friend’s advice to play hard-to-get and not call me on the cruise ship intercoms.

Some people like empty flirting and mind games—I can’t stand it.

Her worst motion was at one point in the ship’s nightclub.

She danced with my brother in front of me in a way that was beyond acceptable; but she wasn’t my girlfriend so I had no say. My crashing confidence took another smashing blow, sending it further into the minus zone.

Why was she doing this to me? It wasn’t right. Envy rose out of my principles, that dictated, “this is revolting.” But I had no say. It seemed like she was playing a game, and the scenario—where my brother at one point felt forced to bring her over to me, knowing she was going too far—made me feel tiny.

I knew how I was supposed to respond.

I knew I was meant to play it cool and act as though I didn’t care.

That’s the world’s ‘handbook,’ labelled ‘treat them mean, keep them keen.’ But

these kinds of unwritten, worldly rules were ridiculous to me.

As we stood up by the bar, sipping Strawberry Daiquiris, overlooking the dance floor, the green in my eyes screamed.

“Why did you do that?” I asked calmly while boldly revealing my envy.

“Do what?” she said.

“Dance with my brother like that?”

“Why, are you envious?” she said, grinning.

“No,” I lied. “It’s just strange doing that.”

“It’s just a bit of fun.”

She continued, enjoying telling me about a time when she’d been on a cruise before and ‘played’ three guys at once.

I stomached the story through sheer moral superiority. I’d thought that no woman would ever do this to me, not out of arrogance, but out of a simple old message from Sunday School days.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

I believed I was protected by that message.

If I didn’t ‘play the field’ and cheat on girls, no girl would do it to me. What I put out into the world, would come back to me. Simple. And so very very wrong.

When the holiday came to an end and we departed from one another, I was upset, but her joyful disposition told me she really didn’t care at all.

I was astonished when she wanted to continue an overseas romance online.

It was January; a new year and a new start.

I was living in Exeter in a six-bedroom house with University friends. This was

after Uni days and following the investment solutions firm job that I'd quit.

The company I was working for delivered a redundancy notice to us within our first days back from Christmas holidays. I was an Insurance Underwriter—a seemingly secure job—and the announcement came as a surprise to the entire team of seventy. But online companionship with Arianna revived my hope in life.

She invited me to her home in Florida for a follow-up vacation.

“I have to wait three months for this redundancy package to come in,” I said, worried she wouldn't be able to remain faithful to me in fast-paced American society.

“We'll see how things go,” she replied.

This was no assurance from her at all, but I knew fidelity was no challenge for me; to have a woman from the US interested in me was a miracle. To have any woman interested in me was special, because at this point, I'd still not experienced the pleasure of a proper girlfriend.

We talked, we laughed, and grew more excited about our impending reunion as January and February passed.

For the first time in my life, it was great to know that someone out there actually had feelings for me. Actually cared for me.

But it didn't last.

Messaging became strained.

Arianna began to get angry at statements where I meant no harm.

“I'm just going out tonight,” I said, outfitted in a knight's garb for a fancy-dress party. I took a photo and sent it to her via Facebook. Skype video was malfunctioning which made her increasingly upset, but I kept telling myself, “Hold it together. It's

only two more months. She'll wait for me."

She laughed at the photo, but turned sour. "You're always going out," she said.

"It's Friday night," I replied.

"Yeah, but you should stay in and be with me."

"I would but this is one of my housemate's birthdays. I wish I could stay. I would, believe me."

I knew she didn't fully comprehend how much I meant it. I didn't want to go out, but such a drastic move would have upset the party of housemates consisting of male and female residents.

"Okay. Go then!" she said.

"Arianna," I replied. "I really want to stay, but I did tell them I would be coming along. I'll call it off, if you really want?"

"I do want you to call it off, but you're all dressed up. So go. Have a good time."

"Okay. Cool. I'll go then. Talk to you later."

Arianna Lane has signed off.

I hated when she'd sharply sign off.

On returning home early from the party, she'd sent a host of messages.

"I miss you so much."

"I hate being alone without you."

"I think I love you."

"I'm a drunken mess right now."

"I'm stupidly drunk."

"Where are you?"

"Forget everything I've said!"

The next time we spoke, she was terrified she'd frightened me away.

When I spoke to her again, I reassured her that I wasn't afraid of her messages, despite slight apprehension. My worry didn't come from what she'd said, but more that she was drinking so heavily.

What would she do?

Would she go out and get a one-night fix for her loneliness?

I stomped on the brakes of my racing mind and allowed a pit-stop moment. I breathed a full sigh and shook my head as I looked at my blue shirt before hanging it in the wardrobe. I'd worn that same shirt on the night I met Arianna. My lucky shirt. I shook my head again.

I'm in a new place now. A new start, I reaffirmed. The past is done. That's over. I can meet someone new.

But like being caught in a tornado's path, I relinquished my grip on present reality, and flew back up into the spiralling abyss of nasty memories—the girl in the red dress...Arianna...

Soon, Arianna's demeanour mutated.

Our online messenger conversations violently altered in tone, with her icy persona as the conspicuous changer.

There were no longer any romantic gestures and talks of when we would see each other.

She became increasingly distant and frosty.

She would sign off saying, "good night friend," or "goodbye amigo."

Whenever I would talk of our reunion—the impending holiday to Florida to see her—I would receive a gust of cold, hard hail in my face. Either no reply or an abrupt switch of subject so conspicuous, it was clear she wasn't even trying to hide her change of heart.

For the tenth occasion, I said to her: "I can't wait to see you. Only a month left."

Arianna Lane has signed off, emerged on the screen.

My heart sunk.

When she returned online later or the next day, she would say her Internet link disconnected and that's why she signed off.

Tormenting days passed, and ending a conversation for what felt like the hundredth time, I said to her, "and I'm really looking forward to seeing you."

"Bye Amigo," she replied, using a 'thumbs-up' icon.

No kisses. No hugs. No hearts.

Arianna Lane has signed off.

My heart beat fast and hard, and my stomach fell into my legs.

During various conversations that followed, I began to ask her questions intermittently, “what’s wrong? What’s going on? Are you okay? Are you seeing someone else?”

“Everything’s fine,” she would always respond.

Then I tried a different approach. “Arianna, if you’ve met someone, I understand.”

I typed with a heart-beat so fast, it made breathing hard.

“No, I haven’t met anyone silly,” she replied. “I haven’t met anybody at all. Don’t worry so much.”

It got worse.

“Hey Arianna,” I said one night.

“Can’t talk for long Chris. I have someone coming over. We’re having steaks and wine!”

“Okay. Cool.”

Please let it be a ‘she.’ Please let it be a ‘she.’

“He’s a really good friend,” she continued. “Oh! He’s here. Got to go. Talk to you later!”

Arianna Lane has signed off.

Every time she disconnected abruptly, my room took on the atmosphere of a Temple of Doom trap—walls closing in, ceiling shifting down.

The coldness of Arianna’s personality continued for a month and a half. And it wasn’t just her. My actual room seemed to be descending into sub-zero temperature,

like the freezer of a morgue readying me for the grave.

I was permitted a fraction of hope in her recurring defence that she hadn't met a new man. But the daily torture of our romantic connection's sudden disappearance—no explanation—was like central heating switched off during a bitter UK February winter.

Whether at home or work, it made every breath I took like inhaling water. I was drowning, but really slowly, and there was nothing I could do.

When I told my father about Arianna, his words were the catalyst that can turn a flowing stream into rock-solid ice. "Son," he said. "You're talking about a young, pretty, single American girl, who lives in an apartment by herself? You know she's got to be having fellas over, right?"

My breathing got worse.

In the end, I sent an email to her calling the whole thing off in the most polite and loving way I could. I signed off the letter: "If you could make someone fall in love with you in a long-distance relationship, then I know you're going to make someone very happy."

Her email back was nowhere near as warm. It was blunt-force trauma; the sentence that repeated in my mind like water-drip torture, kept me awake for four days straight:

*"The idea of you coming here is stressing me out so much. **We don't even know each other.**"*

We don't even know each other, I repeated in my mind. We don't even know each other.

It had all been a lie.

False feelings.

There was nothing between us.

I should have known from all the signs. Even the Valentine's card she'd sent—my first one ever—was hollow.

"I love how much I like you," the card had said and played a rock track that had no association with my music preferences.

I'd sent her a huge card and created a comical, lengthy poem of how we met.

Looking back, I recognise that the size of the card was all the love I've wished to give over the years, amassed in one gesture.

After our final words to each other, I would sign onto Windows Messenger service, only to see her sign off after a few minutes passed.

A couple of weeks later, Facebook's public mini-feed delivered the last, choking blow.

Arianna Lane: I just had a great night out with you-know-who wink wink...and a good morning wink wink.

I was alone again with a tiny financial redundancy package and unemployment.

I moved back to my mother's small flat in London.

Signing on for Job Seeker's Allowance benefit cheques of fifty pounds a week, then failure to acquire a job, was a spiral with the escalator steps travelling in

reverse. Running it was exhausting, but inactivity took me to a basement so dark, I wanted out.

Completely out.

Full days passed sat in my dressing gown, curtains drawn, air stifling with the stench of rejection. My only escape was heavy weekends on whiskey off credit cards. It all had to stop. I wanted to start over.

Things hadn't worked out for me in any way I'd hoped throughout life. No girlfriend. No job. No car. No place to call my own.

Private school education at a prestigious all-boys' institution and attendance to a top English University—all for what? To be back in my mother's flat?

I would listen to music to raise my spirits. Not mainstream singers. Couldn't stand the material they spouted with 'Rock' moaning about a broken heart and 'Hip-Hop' promoting abuse of women, drinking-up, and loitering in the clubs.

I listened to film OST's from John Williams, Hans Zimmer, and 90s Dance like Robert Miles and Sash. It instilled hope and the nostalgia of waking up in the morning as a child, optimistic that life would be fantastic when I reached my teenage years—but it hadn't been.

One night I returned home seriously inebriated.

"Mum," I said, waking her up at what was around three in the morning.

After much incoherent speech, I made the only request that made sense.

"Please let me go," I cried, through slurred talk. "Allow me to let myself go. I don't want this anymore. I don't want any of it. Let me go."

In this same month as I turned twenty-five, my mother's brother Vernon

Sterno, came to visit London. I hadn't seen him in ten years. He proposed I return to the Pharisee Islands with him, live rent and bills free at his villa, and get a job so I could save money. Get back on my feet.

To my family and friends' surprise, and much to my own, the vow ten years prior was kept.

*"If things aren't working out in London in ten years' time, I'll leave the country."
I left.*

Spending November and December in the Pharisee Islands, I managed to scrounge a job as a beach bartender, the only industry that would hire me because every other required that I had a driver's license.

Following, I returned to London for January and February while my Work Permit processed—part of immigration rules—and was back in March.

"Chris!" shouted Vernon from the other side of the bungalow.

"Yeah!" I replied, removing myself from the past's grip.

"I need to introduce you to the dogs and security system before we leave."

"Okay," I said. I packed the last of my clothes away and grabbed my plastic wallet with all my Work Permit paperwork inside.

I shot out of the room, pacing around the corner, passing through the dining room, enjoying the unique smell of the place—like sun lotion. It confirmed I was in new territory. A new beginning.

Vernon was standing by the back door of the kitchen that led to the garden. He had two blue dog bowls in his hands.

“You see these bowls,” Vernon said. “This one is for Rocky. And this one is for Rambo.”

“Okay,” I said, noticing that Rocky’s bowl was larger. “Rocky’s the bigger dog?”

“Yeah. Now. I mix the dry food with the wet for both of them and add water. You’re going to need to feed them sometimes.”

“Oh, okay,” I replied, remembering how I went through this before. Rocky and Rambo were security dogs so they needed to get acquainted to my scent so as to know I wasn’t an intruder.

I put my Work Permit documents down on the table.

Vernon opened the door to the garden and handed the bowls to me.

Here I go again, I thought as I stepped outside. I could hear paw-steps bounding around the villa before both Dobermans appeared, running toward me. Rocky the bigger one jumped at me and I could feel the weight of him as he lifted his forepaws to push against me. I placed the bowls down and the dogs were into the food quickly.

“Okay,” said Vernon, smiling the first smile I’d seen since arriving.

“Alright,” I replied, walking back inside fast and picking up my file.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Vernon locked the kitchen back door and moved toward the front door. “You

remember how to use the alarm system?”

“Yeah, but remind me just in case.”

He handed me a spare key and showed me the code to switch the security on and off.

“You got it?” he said.

I nodded. “Got it.”

“Good.”

We left the bungalow. Vernon jumped in the four-by-four and I followed into the passenger seat.

“Do you think I’ll be able to have two jobs?” I said, pondering the challenge of doing the bar job and the journalist role—if I got it.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” said Vernon. “All you need to do is get the go-ahead from Fives regarding the journalist position. If they allow you, you can have permits for both jobs. Sometimes it can be tricky though. Islanders want the jobs first. They see someone else doing two jobs, they don’t like it.”

He was quiet as we began the drive up through Street Village and took one of the steep, meandering mountain roads into the country of Mortigno.

Traversing the path, we passed clumps of thick forest, till we reached clear roads where huge detached villas could be seen dotted across the mountain terrain. Views of the open-ended sea came into sight and the beautiful, infinite blue sky.

I’m really here. I’m in the Caribbean. I’m in paradise.

As we descended from the mountains of greenery to flat ground and cut across a road parallel to the sea, the view of the ocean was even more majestic on

this side of the island.

We were welcomed onto the bay by the smell of the salt air breathing over us and the sound of the waves crashing against the wall, that separated the road from the sea.

We passed bars I recalled on my last visit. There was Malone's—a little shack on the side of the road, then there was Neato's night club—a large building with a spacious deck area leading onto the beach. Following was Kiwi's, a bright green bar on the right side, also adjacent to the beach. On our left side were apartment blocks of flats and studios, permitting phenomenal views of tropical, panoramic vistas, diverse in nature every single day and night—I remembered how much I missed those views during my two months in London.

The jeep pulled up into a dirt track car park, surrounded by tall trees that leaned in as if they were protecting the few vehicles around.

I've made it. I'm actually here. My new job location—Five O' Clock Somewhere—I'm going to be a real bartender.

I looked toward the beach retreat that I'd be working at.

The sign—high up among the trees—was covered by a few palm leaves with the name Five's and the logo with five hands of different colours forming a circle.

We stepped out of the vehicle and Vernon leaned up against it. "Cain should be in there by now. I'll be around," he said.

"Okay, thanks very much," I replied, and walked toward the sign. A thin path cut-out among the bush into a garden area with a couple of outdoor tables and chairs. The path meandered through the green, opening to the bar and restaurant

like a secret garden location. I walked through with a smile on my face, feeling the same joy of seeing the establishment as I had the first time. There were no nerves, despite the fact that I was walking toward a job interview. Just contentment.

Jacob Cain, I thought.

The smile disappeared from my face.

Jacob Cain. Jacob Cain. Who is he?

I looked around the octagon-shaped bar and the patrons, who were blatant tourists from their attire. Then, I saw them both.

A large man standing up with a grin on his face and another, sat with his back to the restaurant area.

I gritted my teeth as I recognised the bald head and awkward body-shape of the man sitting down.

Oh no.

I blinked hard in disbelief—I knew that extra-dark complexion and those round glasses. I knew that stance, the way he was sat and the clothing he wore.

Oh, no way. No, it can't be him, I thought. *Please, of all people, not him.*

The man who was sitting, turned around.

It was *him*.

CHAPTER FIVE
A Lifetime Opportunity

A Lifetime Opportunity

Thursday, March 11, 12:15 p.m. – Five’s Beach Resort, Sweet-Green Bay

Chris had to restrain himself from glaring.

The man sat in front of him was indeed someone he remembered very, very well. He’d only met him once, but once had been enough.

“Mr Charles, I’m Jacob Cain,” said the man. “Welcome back to the islands. Would you like a drink?”

Chris cleared his throat. “I’m alright thank you,” he replied.

The bartender reached over the bar, extending his fist. “You made it back to paradise,” he said.

Chris bumped his fist, and smiled. “Yep, I’m back Laud. How are you?”

“I got no complaints.”

Jacob gave Laud a stern look.

Laud, a forty-something, light-skinned bartender from St Martin with his distinct cornrows and flamboyant red short-sleeved shirt, retreated. He moved to the other side of the octagon-shaped bar to serve another customer among the dozen holiday-makers that surrounded the place. His shirt with its pattern of large white flowers, added to the paradisaical appearance of the bar.

The entire complex of Five O’ Clock Somewhere—or Five’s as it was referred—was in many ways like a secret garden with a cosy tree house atmosphere. Around the bar were garden stool-chairs, that elevated seated

customers to the height of the bar itself.

Inside the bar area was an 'island' feature where bottles of alcohol were stacked by ascending shelf in order of expense. A computer terminal and till were sat in the centre and on top of the island were the most expensive whiskeys, rums, vodkas, and gins. Two huge wide screen televisions were held in custom-built wooden containers that hung from the wood roof.

A musician played guitar in the corner of the area outside the bar with a sound system supporting his vocals, and a few eager tourists dancing a circle in front of him.

Chris remembered the music track from the last time he was there, singing about vacationers, "letting go, having fun, and setting their souls free." It was the perfect background melody for returning to the island, compelling Chris to inhale his surroundings again.

Across from the bar, the wooden planked floor of the restaurant area encompassed about twenty round tables with garden chairs circling them. It was an open-air establishment with no walls and the second floor above the restaurant comprised the hotel rooms.

A huge stage lay at the back of the restaurant for major performances. The kitchen was tucked away in its own building up a ramp beside the bar, and the barbecue booth stood adjacent to the bar for all the hungry patrons to witness their orders in production.

Beyond the restaurant on a lower level was the beach of Sweet Green Bay, paralleling the entire establishment. The view beyond was incredible—the

white sand, the sparkling sea, and the sun shining bright against the perfect blue sky with neighbouring islands far off in the distance.

Chris took a breath and turned to Saul, who had a big grin on his face. His small head was hunched over his broad shoulders. He wore a blue and white striped shirt over his huge upper body and brown shorts, revealing his stick-like legs. His stature reminded Chris of a movie mob-boss henchman. In a tall glass, he sucked what looked like Cranberry juice through a straw.

Jacob Cain seemed like he was the mob-boss with his golden tie, crisp white shirt, black trousers, and round specs that reflected the light enough to conceal his eyes. Although he was not massively overweight, he dressed well-enough to conceal his protruding belly.

“Now, I understand you’re looking for a writing role,” said Jacob, nestling back in his chair with his fingers pressed together in prayer position.

“Yes, I am,” Chris replied.

“Good. Good. I’ve recently started a News site. You might have heard of it. Simple Island Network News or SINN as we like to call it.” He chuckled at his own joke.

Chris smiled. “No, I haven’t heard of it actually.”

The name ‘SINN’ was certainly audacious, pompous, and callous in a country that claimed to be of the Christian faith, but if Chris remembered rightly, Jacob Cain didn’t care for any pleasantries when it came to demanding or doing what he wanted.

“We think it’s a clever name,” continued Jacob. “And essentially, we’re

aiming to reach the number one News site spot in the Pharisee Islands.”

Chris shrugged his lips. “Saul told me a little bit about the role, so I’m really interested.”

“Good, good. There are two competitors on the island who are in the lead at the moment,” said Jacob. “But my goal is that in a month—” He pointed at Chris. “You’ll make our site number one in the Pharisee Islands. And then we go regional. Take the number one spot in the Caribbean.”

He had a strange tone of voice, just like Chris recalled from that one meeting. An almost high-pitched mixture of American and Caribbean accents. He instantly reminded Chris of Draco, his old manager.

“This is what you’ve been looking for dude,” said Saul with an American accent, his grin growing even wider. “Didn’t I tell you I’d hook you up?”

Chris nodded and smiled. “This sounds great Mr Cain, but there are a few issues I wanted to express.”

“Shoot,” said Jacob, again leaning back in his chair with his fingers poised together.

“First, I don’t have a driving license.”

Jacob appeared unmoved and his round glasses glimmered in reflection of the sun, making it harder to see his eyes.

“I’m planning to get one as soon as possible,” continued Chris. “But I’ve got to organise myself with other things as well.”

“Okay, okay,” replied Jacob. “No challenge there. Next?”

“Second, I need to buy a car and I haven’t got any money at the moment.”

“Well we can sort that out. Get you a nice affordable company car. Take out repayments from your monthly salary, no problem.”

Chris winced. “Alright,” he said wondering why he would have to pay for a vehicle that would belong to the company. “The other thing is that my Work Permit is for this bar. I’m sure you’re aware that I can’t legally change that and I’ve been told it’s pretty hard for an expat to obtain two Work Permits. I mean, that’s what I heard when I was here before.”

“Don’t worry about any of that. We can take care of all of it. In fact, if you want, you can switch your Work Permit over to us.”

“Can I do that?”

“Yessssss,” he emphasised, almost singing the word in a laid-back way like it was nothing at all. He sunk deeper into his chair, twirling his hand as if mixing the air. “We can sort that out for you, no challenge. No challenge at all.”

Chris looked across the bar and caught sight of his new manager to-be, Larry, who came speeding around the outside of the octagon. He was wearing a bright yellow short-sleeved polo shirt and brown shorts.

“So, you made it back! How are you doing?” Larry said, and his eyes darted between Jacob and Saul.

“I’m well thanks Larry, good to see you,” said Chris. “How’s—”

“Excuse me,” Jacob interrupted, looking down at Larry. “We’re having an important conversation here.”

“Yeah,” agreed Saul. “A, b, and see you later.”

Chris narrowed his eyes in surprise at Jacob and Saul’s dismissive

comments, but didn't look at them.

Larry sniggered. "Sorry I said anything," he replied before walking speedily off toward the restaurant area with the beverage glasses he was carrying.

"Stupid white men," said Jacob, whose accent changed strangely into a deeper Caribbean twang. He looked directly at Chris. "You gotta lotta the 'white-man' coming through this bar here. I suppose you're going to be serving dem?"

Before Chris had time to respond, Jacob chimed in again.

"I can't stand this bar. Full of white people. Only reason we came here was to meet you. See if our new hotshot London journalist is up to the task."

Chris was at a loss for words. What was with the blatant racist comments? And had he just secured the job already?

"They won't be here for long," Saul interjected, also morphing into a Caribbean accent. "PIP for real meh-son!"

"Indeed," said Jacob, whose accent had returned to his high-pitched blend of American and Caribbean accents. He stared at Chris. "You like white women?"

"Yeah," replied Chris. "I like all kinds."

"Can't stand them myself," replied Jacob. "Give me black any day. Saul, you like dem white women, don't you?"

Chris noticed it again. The change in accent.

"White woman is easy," said Saul. "White woman don't give you no grief. No headache. Black woman be trouble meh-son."

Jacob laughed. "Nah, not for me. Black is black." He paused with a strange leer. "Anyhow, Mr Charles, we can sort the permit issue. No challenge at

all.”

“Brilliant, that’s great,” muttered Chris. “Well, if you guys could give me some time to think about it and sort things out with Five’s, I’ll get back to you A S A P.”

“Sure. How about you come into my office tomorrow and let me know your answer.” Jacob rose from his stool seat.

“Well, I was thinking a few days, if possible. I’ve got a lot of things to sort out with—”

“Mr Charles, we can’t wait on you. We’re going to be number one. No time for slacking. We need your commitment and we need to move fast. You want to be on the winning team, don’t you?”

“Okay Mr Cain,” said Chris, nodding. “Where should I meet you tomorrow?”

“You know the central Administration Complex?”

“Yeah, I know the place.”

“Come by my office there—just ask reception for me. What time do you think you’ll be there?”

“Umm, shall we say one O’ clock?”

“Yeah...okay. I will make the time for you. Don’t be late.”

“No definitely not. I’ll be there for sure. And thanks very much for the opportunity.” Chris extended his hand and they shook.

“Cool dude,” said Saul and fist-bumped Chris.

“See you later,” said Chris. “And thanks very much Saul.”

The two men walked out of the bar area, into the garden.

“Good to have one of ‘dem’ working for you,” chuckled Saul as they disappeared out of sight.

Chris shook his head, fully-knowing he wasn’t supposed to hear that.

“Those are some creepy characters,” said Larry as he emerged at Chris’ side.

Chris turned to see his short, plump future manager standing beside him. His friendly American accent and kind eyes reassured Chris that things were going to be okay, even though it felt like he was being ensnared by Jacob Cain’s SINN. In Larry’s single observation, Chris felt like he was holding back on something he knew about Jacob and Saul.

“Yeah,” mumbled Chris in agreement. “They are a little creepy.”

Larry chuckled. “Shall we go inside the office and talk about you getting started?”

“Great—let’s do it.”

They walked past the garden area entrance to a wooden block building that seemed to blend in with the jungle-garden surroundings. The air-conditioned office was cooling on the body as Larry swung the door open and Chris followed in.

“Reception staff are usually here, but they’re out today,” said Larry. “I’m running the show all on my lonesome.”

“Cool.”

“So,” he said as he sat at his desk and wheeled an office chair over to

Chris.

“So, what happens next?” replied Chris as he sat.

“You have to pick up your permit which I believe costs—” he grabbed a sheet of paper with print on it from his desk and read. “Four-hundred bucks.”

Chris’ eyes widened.

“You may want to get yourself a cocktail mixing book and a few other props,” continued Larry. “We sell them at the shop here, but Laud will help you with all the additional stuff.”

Calculating it in his head, the move from London had now cost him \$3200 including the air fares. But it would be worth the trouble. It was paradise after all. It’s got to have a cost.

“Okay, wow,” Chris began. “Um, I thought all the permit stuff was done and paid for, wasn’t it?”

“Nope, you gotta pay for the permit,” said Larry.

Damn, Chris thought, knowing he would have to borrow the money off Vernon. This would compound the feeling of outstaying his welcome, and it was only the first day.

“And then you need to take your Food Handler’s Test,” continued Larry.

“Huh? Okay. What’s the Food Handler’s Test?”

“Nothing too serious. Just a silly tutorial about basic, easy things and then a little exam at the end. Very simple. Nothing to worry about. I think you just missed one and the next one comes up in two weeks.”

“Oh really? So, I can’t start work till that’s done?”

“Nope, but don’t sweat it. You’ve done the hard stuff. The whole thing is a long, drawn-out process, but you’re almost there.”

“Yeah, that stool test was revolting. I can’t believe how much loo water holds the stink back. I almost vomited.”

He laughed. “They still make you do that, huh?”

“Yeah. It was disgusting.” Chris paused as Larry shuffled through some desks, looking for something.

“How long have you been here for then?” said Chris. “On the Pharisee Islands I mean?”

“About fifteen years now.”

“Really? Wife? Kids?”

“They’re back in the States.” He chuckled.

“Okay.”

“Yeah. Best all-round setup really.”

“Right.” Chris nodded feeling awkward, like his question had taken him beyond the ‘no trespassing’ sign of Larry’s mind.

“Yeah,” continued Larry. “So as soon as you’ve paid for your permit with your Food Handler’s Test completed, you can start. And believe me, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Oh, really?” Chris breathed a nervous chuckle. “Why?”

“Customer service needs improving, big time! And from talking to you, let’s just say your kind of character is needed. I know you’re probably a little anxious, but with the rest of the bartending stuff, you’ll just learn it as time goes on. It’s

easy. What I told Sandra in recruiting you is our need to boost our relationships with customers.” He handed Chris the signed and approved Work Permit document.

“Who’s Sandra?”

“She’s the owner.”

“Okay. Well, brilliant,” said Chris, reviewing the signed and approved papers. “I’m truly looking forward to starting too, but um—” He breathed a heavy sigh. “There’s one major surprise that’s come up.”

Larry’s jovial expression firmed up.

“Do you remember when I told you that my main purpose for coming here was to get a writing job?” said Chris.

Larry remained still. “Yeah,” he droned.

“Well, I um. I just got head-hunted for a journalist role by those guys. I was wondering if we could find a way to work with me having a second job? I was thinking I work the bar on night shifts?”

“Sure, I don’t see that as a problem per se.”

The answer was music to Chris’ ears. He expected resistance, but it appeared like things were going to work out.

“We can work around it,” continued Larry. “Only thing is, you have to have a trial period of two weeks where we train you in the day. Can’t have you on the night shift to start. No way.”

“Oh. I see,” Chris replied. “Is there no way that the trial can be shorter?”

“Sorry Chris. It’s got to be at least a fortnight of day shifts to get you

confident with making the main drinks. Then I can put you on nights. Lush will be training you during the day. She's really nice. Also—forgot to say—you're going to need a social security card and a bank account as well which can take a few weeks to sort.”

“Right. Okay.”

“You know if you're quick enough, you should be able to get the permit sorted and put in applications for the social security and bank account today. As for the Food Handler's Test, like I said before, I think the next one is two weeks from now.”

“Okay. Okay. May I have a pen and paper? I need to write all this stuff down.”

“Sure.”

Larry tore a piece of paper from a memo pad and passed across a pen.

“Thanks,” said Chris. “Okay, so I've got to get a bank account, social security number...”

Chris added ‘going to the medical unit’ and ‘returning to the airport to collect his passport’ to the list as well.

“...collect my Work Permit and pay four hundred dollars,” he continued and jotted down more tasks that came to mind so the list broadened.

Get Bank Account

Get Social Security Card

Go to Medical unit to get medical certificates confirmed

Return to airport to collect Passport

Pay \$400 for Work Permit

Get a cocktails book from Five's shop

Go to job interview with Jacob Cain

Get information about Driving Test

Get a vehicle

Get a laptop

“Brilliant. I’d better get to it,” said Chris. “One more thing. Do you know where the government medical unit is? I need to confirm some of my medical documents from the UK. They confiscated my passport at the airport.”

“Wow. They still do that too, huh? Crazy power trip for those guys. You know it’s illegal, right?”

“No, really? I had no idea.”

“Yeah. You’re gonna find a lot of that kind of thing here.”

Chris frowned, unsure of what Larry meant.

“Government medical is in the same complex as the Labour and Immigration department,” said Larry. “You know where that is?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“They should be able to sign off the documents you have. If you’re really lucky, you might be able to make it in time to get your Work Permit today, but you have to be quick.” He chuckled. “And you still have to wait for the Food Handler’s Test in two weeks.”

“Cool,” Chris said, getting up quickly. “Thanks very much for all your help Larry and I suppose I’ll see you soon.” He took a breath. They shook hands and Chris left the building.

There was a distinct feeling that Chris couldn’t shake as he stepped outside. Even though Larry had been perfectly clear and honest with him, there seemed to be a hesitance in him. Chris didn’t know why he was getting this impression, but the hesitance appeared like Larry was trying to say, *Chris, you’ve made a bit of a mistake in coming back to work on these islands.*

Chris could not place what it was about Larry’s words or facial expressions, but he detected this bizarre aura. He’d already seen it in Vernon too.

Chris shook his head and dismissed the thoughts as ‘negative thinking.’ There was no time for pessimism. He was starting his new life as a renewed person.

He walked up to the bar where Laud was serving three cheering women, likely in their early forties.

From the opposite side of the bar, Chris looked past the women to the beach, and the sun shining into the bar—a new start. *The new start. Paradise.*

“You made it back!” said Laud, laughing and pouring drinks. “When do you start?”

“In two weeks. Got to do the Food Handler’s Test and sort some other details out, but, this is it!”

The women smiled at Chris and he waved back at them.

“You’re gonna have the women lining up when you get in here,” said Laud. The women nodded. “You best be ready! Because man’s gonna be eating! Man’s gonna be eating!”

Chris smirked, not really understanding what Laud meant. He then spotted three islanders he recognised, staring at him from another side of the bar. One was a tall, bald-headed man with a stud earring, black T-shirt, and blue jeans. His face was fierce. Chris recalled his name was Rich. People called him the local know-it-all man. Others said he was the crime-kingpin of Sweet-Green Bay and that his friendly attitude toward the tourists was his cover. His regular drinking partner—who was just as tall as him—was called Raid.

Chris remembered meeting Raid in the one of the local nightspots in the centre of Town called The Fortress of Solitude. Raid’s response to Chris when he’d introduced himself as the nephew of Vernon Stern, was the first time he felt threatened about being related to the Pharisee Islands’ Police Commissioner.

“You’re the Commissioner’s nephew?” Raid had said, towering above him. “The Commissioner’s a wicked man.”

Raid was a six-foot four, lanky guy, and his face drooped as if he was always fatigued. His yellowing eyes proclaimed that he had no cares in the world. He wore a hat that somehow maintained his huge dreadlocks neatly inside.

Then there was their other partner, Lucian. He was shorter than the other two, with thin arms, and thin legs. He was a man whose large head and mouth were only surpassed by his immense, protruding belly that he could easily use to rest a drink on. He would often scream, “Waaaaaa,” when something surprised

him. He always looked like he'd been sleeping in a barn, wearing T-shirts and shorts that appeared dishevelled around the edges.

Chris put his thumb up to them and they in turn nodded their heads, then whispered to each other.

Raid approached, dragging his feet. "Commissioner's nephew," he said with a grin and bloodshot eyes. Chris could smell his strong breath, like a dose of blue cheese. "You back in paradise?"

"Yep. Gonna be bartending right here."

"Man's gonna be swimming!" he said, his voice elevating. "Right Laud! He's a handsome man! Gonna be eating alotta food. You make sure to share."

Laud laughed. "A regular sweet-boy."

Chris nodded and smiled. "Well guys. I've got to head off. A lot of things to do. Where's the shop Laud?"

"Right there," said Laud, pointing across the restaurant to a large boutique to the left of the stage.

Chris wondered how he ever missed this store when he was here on the islands the first time. "Thanks," he said and walked at the side of the restaurant where only a couple of the tables were occupied by middle-aged couples.

The store was a barefaced window pane, revealing all that was inside for anyone outside. Walking in, the brown tiled space was well air conditioned and shelves lined up with typical tourist trinkets and necessities for tropical lifestyle.

Passing a row of Five's branded key chains, and a shelf of colourful beach towels, he saw novelty books clearly designed with tourists in mind.

He picked up the first book that read *Pirate's Cocktails Mixing Guide* and didn't bother to flick through.

He approached the shop keeper, who was an attractive light-skinned girl, possibly in her late twenties, dressed in blue jeans and a purple, sleeveless top.

"Just this, thanks," said Chris.

"Okay, that will be thirteen ninety-nine," she replied.

"Thanks," said Chris as they made the exchange.

Chris quickly walked out, knowing that if he made good time, he could accomplish a lot today.

As he exited the shop, he could see Vernon far off in the garden area, hidden by the trees, but looking in his direction. Reaching the exit of the Five's garden area, Chris forced out the request he was loathed to say. He detested asking anyone for anything.

"Everything good?" said Vernon.

"Yeah." Chris paused.

"What's that?"

Chris raised the book that Vernon was staring at. "It's a cocktail mixing guide," he replied.

This looks irresponsible, Chris thought. I need to borrow four hundred dollars and here I am buying cocktail recipe books. This made Chris' next question increasingly hard.

"Vernon, um," he began. "I've been told the Work Permit costs four hundred dollars."

“Okay,” replied Vernon.

Chris took another quiet breath. “Is it possible I can borrow the money?” he said. “I only came here with a few hundred in my pocket and had no idea the permit was going to cost me.”

Vernon’s face was stern as they walked back to the car and got in.

“Okay,” he said. He pulled out a wad of hundred-dollar bills and handed Chris the money.

Chris’ stomach sunk as he stuffed it into his wallet. “Thanks so much for this,” he said, with his hatred of debt rekindled. “I’ll get the money back to you as soon as my first pay cheque comes in.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Vernon. “What did Cain say?”

“Well, it seems like I’ve got the job already from the way he was talking. He’s asked me to see him tomorrow, but yeah...he was speaking like things were concrete and I was going to get started soon.”

“Good.”

“If you could drop me by the Labour Department, I’ll make my way home from thereafter.”

“Sure.”

They began the drive back to town.

“I’m back at work tomorrow,” said Vernon. “You should be able to take care of yourself with everything else?”

“Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem. I remember where most things are.”

“What was that guy saying to you?”

“Which guy?”

“The tall man with the dreadlocks.”

“Oh Raid. He was just saying hello. He’s that guy that I met last time who’d said ‘you’re a wicked man.’” Chris laughed, but Vernon remained silent.

Chris recalled the first time he’d told Vernon about that interaction. Vernon had chuckled before, but he didn’t this time.

The journey across the bay, then back through the mountains seemed faster on return. Chris was getting used to the navigation.

At the pinnacle of the mountain was a clear view of Street Village down below with its various, vibrantly-coloured buildings dotting the terrain. The magnificent sea and sky spread out after the island to other isles around in the distance.

What a view, Chris thought.

They reached the bottom of the hill, that took them straight into town. The roads were busy and slow, with congestion catching them by the traffic lights at one of the major junctions before the roundabout.

“Right,” said Vernon as he parked up on the side of a main road with cars rushing by.

“Okay,” Chris replied. “I’ll see you back at home.”

“Yeah,” said Vernon. “Any trouble—call me.”

“Will do. Thanks very much. And, can you take this?” Chris handed the cocktails book to Vernon.

“Sure.”

Chris felt his stomach punch out as Vernon drove off. He was asking too much of his host. Staying at his uncle's place made him uncomfortable already, relying on somebody he didn't even know. Now, borrowing money too. He didn't like it at all and deliberately neglected to tell Vernon that he was going to the medical unit first, then onto the airport before he could deal with the Labour Department and finalisation of his Work Permit. He figured that Vernon would drive him around to all these places and he didn't want to put him out any more than he already had.

He crossed the busy main road, looking ahead at a large rectangle, two-storey building complex that he knew to be the location for Government departments. Like most buildings in the Pharisee Islands, it was painted a bright colour—light orange in this case.

Jogging the black asphalt steps, he entered the sheltered pathway that had signs pointing directions to the various Government sections.

He followed the one to the medical unit, taking some switch-back stairs up a narrow alcove. He found himself on a chrome balcony and pushed open the glass door labelled *Medical*.

"We're just closing up!" shouted a man with a strong Caribbean accent. *It was early afternoon*, thought Chris. *How can they be closing now?*

Chris perused the white-walled waiting room. He saw the receptionist who was typing at his computer. He had a slim-fit white shirt, tight black trousers, and a hairstyle that represented the black man's version of a Mohican; a hairstyle that Chris had noticed was becoming prevalent in the UK. It seemed that the

Caribbean had taken to it as well.

“I just need something checked, please,” said Chris. “It’s of the utmost importance.”

“Oh, so just because you say it’s important, I should stop closing up should I?” said the receptionist.

Chris remained quiet.

“It’s not of importance to us,” he continued in a mock British accent. “Do you think that because it’s of importance to you, that we’re to drop everything for you? We’re closing.”

A spitefully-cutting laugh followed.

A woman came out from a room behind the desk. She was likely in her thirties, fair skin, with blond hair, and firm facial features making her striking to look at. “Hi sir, how can we help you?” she said, folding her arms in her white lab coat.

Chris’ eyes flicked between the islander who had spoken and the blond woman, whose accent was American.

“Hi,” said Chris, reading her badge that said Dr Lena. “I had some issues coming in through immigration today with these.” He handed her the medical tests.

She scanned the documents and handed them back to Chris. “Yeah, they really prefer the official forms. Not copies.”

“Did you go through the same trouble when you came here? They even took my passport, which I hear is illegal.”

“No,” interrupted the receptionist. “She’s PI born and bred, for real. She’s more real than you.”

Chris kept his eyes on the doctor, pretending he didn’t hear how unbelievably rude this man was being.

“If you don’t like how we do things here,” continued the receptionist. “Leave.”

The physician smiled. “We could contact your doctor and get the originals sent via fax? But I assume they’ll be closed. Five hours ahead, right?”

“Yeah,” said Chris.

“Let me look again.”

Chris handed the paperwork back to her.

She reviewed the photocopied certificates, one by one.

Chris kept his eyes on her, hoping.

“Wow, you did a lot of tests,” she said. “Did you actually need to do all this?”

“No. I was trying to make sure I didn’t have any trouble with immigration.”

“I see. Well, I can authorise these,” she said. “It’s going to cost fifty dollars, but I can stamp-approve them right now, and then you’ll be able to get your passport back.”

Chris nodded and slowly pulled out his wallet, handing over the money. His jaw tensed at the idea that he may have to ask Vernon to borrow more money before he got his first pay cheque—a detestable action in his mind. He absolutely hated borrowing off anyone. It was a last resort, yet he’d already done

it on his first day.

Sweat trickled down his head.

“May I have a paper towel?” he said, noticing a roll on the desk.

“What do you say?” said the man.

“Sorry,” said Chris. “Please.”

The doctor rolled her eyes and pulled a paper towel, smiling sympathetically at Chris. “Here you go.”

Chris patted down his head. “Thanks very much for your help.”

He looked at the time on the clock and saw that he might have enough to make it to the airport and back to the Labour Department to collect his Work Permit card.

“Alright, have a nice day,” she said.

“See you later,” he replied as he breezed out the door.

Chris knew his next step wouldn't be easy. Hitching a ride; a normal practice in the PI.

He darted down the staircase, back through the outdoor corridor, and down the stairs.

Pacing across the main road to the side with motorists heading in the direction of the airport, he put his thumb out.

This was another aspect he remembered well from last time he was in the PI and he detested it; relying on the generosity of strangers to get him from point A to point B. Not good.

Minutes began to drop off the clock as the ever-blazing heat hit him.

Sweat poured out of him so much, it looked as if he had some physical malady.

Got to avoid wearing a black T-shirt in future, he thought.

The heat didn't stop and cars continued to pass by. He could swear he saw islanders pointing and laughing from their cars; big, garish smiles of mocking. The more he witnessed the jeering, the more his face became serious, and the more he felt his decreasing chance of appearing like a friendly person in need.

Why was it taking so long to get a ride? Wasn't this island supposed to have village mentality? Friendlier? Safer? Trusting of newcomers?

He tried to breathe slowly to control his heat receptors, but the sweat kept pouring out—embarrassingly so. He looked terrible.

Twenty minutes had gone by easily and his chances of getting to the airport and back to the Labour Department in time, were looking slimmer.

His frustration grew in the creases on his face. It was hard not to frown. More smiling faces of drivers irritated him further. What was so damn funny?

Finally, a tiny four-by-four pulled up—the kind that had a conspicuous feminine look. The vehicle was baby blue and inside, a small Filipino man waved Chris in.

Chris moved quickly as he ran around into the street to jump in the passenger side.

American built cars on British streets—what idiot thought this up?

“Hello,” said the man.

“Thanks very much,” replied Chris.

“No problem. No problem,” he said, handing Chris a paper towel from a roll in his glove compartment. His voice was light and airy—almost squeaky with a brokenness to his sentence construction.

He giggled, then left a strange silence permeating the car’s atmosphere. “You new here?” he said.

“Yeah. Just got in today.” Chris patted himself down and scrunched the towel up into his pocket.

“Yes,” replied the man with a slur. “I haven’t seen you before. You look fresh. Brand new.”

Chris nodded and his eyes receded.

Another silence.

Chris observed something a little odd about his car dashboard. Fixed in the centre was a small stuffed imitation of a large black gorilla cuddling a small brown monkey. Chris’s eyes peered to his side at the little Filipino man.

“What do you do?” the man asked.

“I’m a writer, but will be a bartender soon. Just getting my Work Permit sorted so I’m headed to the airport. Are you going near there?”

He chuckled. “That’s exactly where I’m going.”

Silence yet again.

“So, where you from?” he said.

“London.”

“Oh wow. London’s very nice. Very big. Really good money. Lots to do.”

He paused. “Why you come here?”

“Looking to build my writing career really. Less competition here for writing jobs, so just hoping I get something soon.”

“Hmmm, okay, okay.”

The silences made the discussion more of an interview than an informal conversation.

“You a strong a man?” he said as a mixture of a statement and question.

“You exercise?”

Chris smiled with tight lips. “I do my best.”

“Yes, very strong. Very strong. We should go for a drink.”

Chris’ eyes narrowed as he looked at the happy, little brown monkey on the dashboard, being hugged by the huge black gorilla. “Sure mate. Sure.”

“Yeah. It good to know more people around. Where you live?”

“I’m going to be living with my uncle. He’s the Police Commissioner.”

“Oh wow. Big position. Big power. Wow. So your uncle Police Commissioner?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. Okay. Okay.”

Chris looked out the window.

The silence held for a lot longer this time.

“You married?” said the driver.

“No,” said Chris, now longing for the airport to arrive.

“Girlfriend?”

“Not yet. But hopefully soon.”

“Oh. Oh.”

The longest silence yet pervaded.

They arrived at the airport and Chris was opening the door before the car had pulled up. “Thanks very much,” he said.

“See you and good luck,” said the man.

Documents in hand, Chris walked straight to the immigration booth inside the airport.

He recognised the man at the booth, who’s face looked stern, as if he hadn’t expected to see Chris again so soon.

“Hey, I got that approval,” said Chris handing over the documents.

The man glared at the documents. He disappeared underneath his desk and returned with Chris’ passport, adding his own immigration stamp to the documents. He didn’t say anything.

“Thanks,” said Chris.

“Yeah.”

Chris stepped out of the airport. The heat hit him again and the idea of waiting to hitch a ride disgusted him.

He flagged a taxi driver—an islander with a thick head of white hair contrasting his dark skin—standing up eating from a polystyrene box. The driver, who wore the island taxi uniform of a sky blue short sleeved shirt with the red printed tag *Island Limos* on his chest moved slow, putting the plastic fork back in the box, shutting it, and waving Chris over to his minibus, out of the few lined up.

He pointed to the side door. Chris opened it and jumped in. Before he

knew it, the man was driving them out of the airport.

“Where to?” he said.

“Street Village Labour Department,” said Chris.

“That’s gonna run you twenty-five.”

“Yeah—fine.”

The taxi driver’s face was miserable—pure vexation with something or someone. He didn’t speak the whole journey, which suited Chris as this journey was costing him considerable money he did not have.

They reached the Labour Department and Chris handed him \$25, feeling a pang of anxiety at his deteriorating funds. The taxi driver didn’t say anything nor even look at Chris.

Chris walked into the complex and followed the sign that said *Labour* this time, keeping him on a path on the ground floor that meandered to the other side of the entire building. He pushed open the glass door and entered the air conditioned seating space.

Windowed booths lined one wall, the centre was aligned with four rows of firmly planted plastic seats, and the sides had a water cooler, magazines on a table, and a ticket machine.

He pulled a ticket—a small blue slip with fifty-nine in bold black font—picked up the smoothest-looking magazine of the pile titled *Pharisee Island Lifestyle*, and sat down.

The magazine looked professional and clean with a hard binding. There were photos of two editors in the front—a male and a female in their late thirties,

early forties.

He looked up and nodded at one of the three people seated with him; a man of about sixty with a walking stick. The man turned away.

Chris shrugged and flipped through the magazine. He was drawn to an interview piece with an islander artist. He read and his eyes narrowed. The photos were attractive and the overall layout was pleasant, but there were huge grammar and punctuation mistakes, really long sentences without commas, and even a spelling mistake. He searched through more pages of the publication. The layout was smooth, but he kept seeing little errors; the sorts of mishaps that only a person with an eye for English language would see.

He continued reading another article about the yacht industry and the growing attraction of catamarans over monohulls.

“Calling Fifty-Nine,” said the automated announcement.

Chris placed the magazine down, and walked to the booth with his Work Permit documents in hand. “Hi, I’ve come to collect my Work Permit please.”

Chris handed the large woman all his documents.

“I’m sorry, what?” she replied. She looked sincerely annoyed by what Chris had said.

“I said I’ve come to collect my Work Permit.”

“And ‘good afternoon’ to you too,” the woman said in a tone that sounded as if Chris were to know why she was angry.

“Um, good afternoon?”

“That’s better. Round here, we use manners.”

Chris raised his eye brows. This and the other interactions he'd experienced today weren't the relaxed Caribbean demeanour he'd anticipated.

"Your passport as well please," said the woman as she reviewed all the paperwork.

"It's there," replied Chris.

She pulled it out from the plastic wallet.

"Okay," she said. She got up with great strain as if detaching herself from the seat for the first time in weeks. She waddled through the office where Chris could see other employees, typing away at computers, filing documents in cabinets, and talking on phones. It was a medium size office and the few workers there looked very unhappy. At intervals, they peered at Chris in a manner that seemed unwelcoming, then got back to what they were doing.

The woman tottered over, one hand carrying the paperwork and the other hand loosely swinging around her large waist.

She still didn't look at Chris. "Okay, come inside."

She pressed a button underneath her desk and a door to the side buzzed, with a LED on the side turning green.

Chris walked toward the door and pushed it open.

"Just sit there," she said.

Chris observed an unusual machine connected to a computer and a camera facing in his direction.

The woman walked over to the desk with the peculiar computer and began tapping at the keyboard.

“Face the camera,” she said. “Keep your head up. Look in this direction. That’s it.”

She typed at the keyboard some more and the unusual looking machine began to murmur.

A dispenser beside the machine, pushed out a card.

Chris’ eyes revealed awareness as he realised what it was.

“Okay,” she said. “You’re done.”

“Thanks very much,” said Chris. She handed him his paperwork and he examined his Work Permit card.

He was doing it. He was actually making headway!

As she walked back to her desk, he looked at the time knowing the bank and social security offices would be closed now. One more establishment popped into his head as a place to visit.

He walked out of the Government building and down the street. The roads were busy with motorists and very few pedestrians—likely because the heat was relentless. His skin started to become moist within seconds as he passed detached buildings housing retailers, then a huge bank—an immense glass building where he could see the employees getting ready to close up. He continued walking across a pleasant park with a statue in the centre of a man who had been commemorated for his philanthropic dedication to the PI. He reached a dock where his destination lay—The Fortress of Solitude Restaurant and Bar.

He walked into the open-air restaurant with its standard layout of wooden

tables, some with four chairs, some with two, and caught sight of the woman he was looking for.

He smiled and she smiled back.

She was a petite, slim American woman of about fifty. She had bright blue eyes and brilliant, straight white teeth. She was clearly a woman who would've had to keep her own mace to shun the men a few years back, but the beginnings of ageing had commenced with strokes of grey in her brown hair, and wrinkles around her eyes and mouth.

"May," said Chris. "How are you?"

"Chris—welcome back." They hugged. "I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Just stopped in to say hello."

"Well you made it."

"I know. This is it."

Chris caught it. It was the slightest motion. But Chris definitely saw it. May was giving off the same hesitance as Larry did.

"What's that?" she said pointing to the plastic wallet of papers Chris held.

"Oh this—it's all my documents and a list of things I've got to get done here."

"Oh," she said with her eyebrows raised. "Take my advice. You're lucky if you can get one of those things done a week, let alone in a day."

"Really?"

"Things are slower around here. Something you will have to get used to."

"Hmm. How have you been anyway?"

“Well, we’re coming into the slow season soon, so trying to make the most of the cruise-ships.”

“Okay, okay. Is business going well?”

“Well we get slammed on our Friday nights—absolutely packed in the bar upstairs. The restaurant’s not doing so well, but we’re getting by.”

“That’s good. Well it’s good to see you May. Sorry, it’s a short visit, but I’ll catch up with you soon.”

“Okay Chris, will see you later.”

The walk home was almost a straight path from the Fortress of Solitude bar on the dock, through the main hub of town.

Sweat dripped relentlessly from Chris, making him wonder how he would ever get used to this climate.

Arriving at Vernon’s villa, he heard the dogs bark a bit before going quiet again.

The air conditioning of the ceiling fans was a welcome relief. He went straight to his bedroom and lay down on his bed.

Cupping his hands behind his head, he retreated inside himself.

There were so many thoughts and emotions travelling through his skull, it was difficult to focus.

Was Vernon still okay with him staying here?

Borrowing money forced Chris into a lowly place and reminded him that this relocation was his last-ditch effort to salvage his life. Like a man full of despair, clinging to the edge of a cliff, he was at the mercy of anyone around him.

He felt his confidence sinking just to think on it.

Why did it seem like the people he'd seen today were subtly saying he'd made a big mistake? No one had said anything of the sort, but there was a silent, strange atmosphere, like he'd walked into a trap that had claimed many—as if Larry and May were already prisoners and they'd fallen for the same trap.

And the people in admin—why were they so rude? It wasn't just lack of education. That guy in medical, the immigration officers, the taxi driver; it was a clear, shocking, deliberate coarseness to their tone, like some form of defiance to an authority figure.

But one thought trumped the rest.

Working for Jacob Cain—what would it be like?

It appeared like the job was Chris' already; no problem at all. He would have his dream job of being a published writer and the meeting tomorrow was just a formality.

So why did it feel like he was walking into a trap?

Good to have one of 'dem' working for you.

Chris knew exactly what Saul had meant with this comment. Chris was a British black man. 'British' being the operative word. It indicated that they wanted dominance over him.

This is negativity, Chris said to himself. *Stop being so pessimistic*. But his mind continued pressing. He'd met Jacob Cain once before, and only once. But this singular event had stapled an impression on Chris, and it wasn't a good one.

In fact, it was the worst first-impression Chris had ever perceived.

CHAPTER SIX

Jacob Cain

Jacob Cain

Friday, March 12, 12:16 p.m. – Uncle Vernon's Villa

He's a psychopath and a megalomaniac.

This was the conclusion I'd drawn when I first met Jacob Cain three months ago. And here I was, on my way out to meet him for a job interview.

During my two months extended vacation in the PI the previous year, uncle Vernon provided a guided tour of the islands, allowing me to meet many people native to the Territory.

On one night, he invited me to a political meeting named 'The Round Table.'

Joining Vernon, we convened with two other men at a small, quiet waterfront bistro in Street Village, overlooking the ocean, a ten-minute walk from Vernon's home.

We were the only customers, sat in the patio area of the establishment enjoying glasses of fruit punch. The intermittent ambiance of motorists driving by on the main road was our shared company, as the older men and Vernon discussed political and economic matters of the PI.

Jacob Cain arrived.

"Sorry I'm late gentlemen," he said, adjoined with the scraping of a chair as he

pulled it out to take a seat. "I had a prior engagement."

Jacob and the two older men who I'd gathered were members of the reigning political faction PIP—Pharisee Island Party—talked about the deteriorating economic state and the fact that they were about to lose power to their opponents, the NVP—National Voice Party.

The two men wore dark polo shirts with black jeans. While they seemed to do all the talking, Vernon remained quiet and so did Jacob. After a solid twenty minutes of back and forth between the men, one of them, with his bulging belly, bushy side burns, and a receding hairline spoke loudly and cursed.

"Man!" he shouted. "We be losing everything! PI is going down meh-son! We ain't got no money!"

Jacob leaned back in his chair, the foot of one leg balancing on the knee of his other leg reminding me of depictions exhibiting conquering emperors. His forefinger was poised against his temple and his thumb balanced his chin, leaning his head into his hand as if hatching an intricate scheme.

Dressed in a white shirt, gold tie, and black trousers, he had a round, shiny bald head, very dark skin, and a protruding stomach, that he was clearly trying to hide by folding one arm across his torso. Behind his round glasses, his beady, grey eyes did not leave the main speaker.

"We got nothing now and why?" continued the loud man. "Because we keep giving jobs to fools who can't do it! We need 'dem' people meh-son."

"Gentlemen," said Jacob, raising his hands as if expecting everyone to stop speaking. The chatter ceased. "We will take back the Pharisee Islands, but we need

firm leadership that only the PIP can provide.”

Jacob’s voice had a slight American accent mixed in with Caribbean and a high-pitched tone. “We need a leader who’s willing to limit the intake of these outsiders, and give more back to the people born here. More jobs, more money, more opportunity. We need to be PI all the way. No more mister expat white-man for our lawyers and CEOs of PI law firms and fiduciaries. Enough said. Now, what’s the challenge with that?”

He leaned back in his chair, proud of his ingenious words; as if he’d said something so innovative, the men would have no retort.

“How can we function without expats?” said the large man, who’d been the most outspoken so far. “Have you seen the customer service of our people? You go to order a drink and they kiss their teeth ya know. Man don’t know what they’re doing.”

The other older man, who was small and skinny, laughed. “True, true,” he said, chuckling.

“So we train them,” said Jacob. “We give the island back to we, putting them in schools. We educate them. We do what we can to see our people come up.”

“It nah possible,” said the large man. “And ya nah talking truth Cain.” He grinned crookedly as if he knew a secret about Cain that none of us were privy to.

A smile blossomed across Cain’s face like he’d been caught out. His head tilted forward and the patio lights reflected in his glasses, concealing his eyes. “What do you mean? I always tell the absolute, unwavering, objective truth.”

“You talk about giving jobs to our people, yet you give that big water contract

to the British. We have the work force here for that—why ya not give it to we?”

His question appeared to stump Jacob for a few seconds.

I'd heard about this water contract; something to do with repairing the island-wide water shortage. Some had argued for the contract to remain on the island, supplying jobs for the islanders. Others had debated for the British to take the contract as the islands were an overseas territory of the British and they could do a better job of fixing it. But it was blatantly obvious to everyone involved that those who argued for the latter did it for financial reasons—it meant their pockets were going to get a lot heavier.

“Now, now, I've already been clear on this point many times—” began Jacob.

“But you cheat your people Cain!” shouted the big man. “You talk and talk and talk, but you do nutin' for we. That water contract should have gone to we. Come on meh-son! Stop talking dis nonsense!”

“No, no, no. We need to make sure we take care of the water shortage and the best way is to keep the British happy...for now. Then we concentrate on jobs for our people.”

“You're full of it Cain. You's a cheat, and you know it. That's big money for you and your Ministry. You don't forget that now. That's what I say meh-son. Big money for you when you feel, and you know what you doin'. You don't give the contract to your people. You makin' big money.” He kissed his teeth. “You's a cheat Cain. Don't try talk dat to me.”

Jacob continued to smile like a child whose misdeeds had been uncovered.

“And don't forget,” continued the big man, now looking directly at me while

pointing at Jacob. "My boy 'ere is trying to be the Premier ya know."

It appeared as if Jacob's ambition to be Premier—head of Government—was some dark scheme that he was conducting underhandedly. Vernon and the other older man smiled and Jacob grinned like his entire plan had been spilled.

"Yeah, don't forget dat," said the large man.

"Wowwee," replied the other mature man.

"Well," said Jacob, rising from his chair and clearing his throat. "Let's call it a night sirs. I have another engagement and I'm running late. Just wanted to stop by and bless you with my presence."

His joke didn't move anyone as the large man turned away, the other man shook his head, and Vernon remained quiet and focused. I watched as Vernon and the other two men rose from their seats and all shook hands with each other.

I did the same, shaking hands with all the men. It appeared the meeting was over.

I came to Jacob and on the cusp of extending my hand, he turned away from me. "Good night gentlemen," he said and walked toward a family-size, ruby-red, contemporary, four-by-four Jaguar.

Vernon ushered me to follow him with a flick of his head. We walked toward the large paved car park that lay on the waterfront.

I looked over as Jacob Cain pulled out of the car park and nodded at Vernon, before driving onto the main road and out of sight.

I would never want to be friends with that man, I thought. And I would never want to work for him.

It was a harsh judgement to make and I was taken back by its severity in my mind. But it was everything that lay in the 'unsaid' of the conversation.

Jacob had been rude, arrogant, deceptive, egocentric, and dismissive—that much was clear from the brief discussion. But in his body language and facial expressions—the crossed legs, the deliberate eye contact or lack of, the smile—he'd shown that he truly had no empathy for his fellow man.

Worse, he was lying in every movement he made and seemed to enjoy his own performance. He was a man that relished lying; and worse still, people knew he was deceiving others in Government and yet, they were still dancing to his tune, likely lying with him. It appeared to me that he revelled in the power of getting people to embellish his lies.

First impressions are not the most important part of character evaluation; on that first day of meeting, a person can be ill, have the wrong chemical mix travelling their body after some unhealthy dietary choices, be suffering severe emotional issues from a trauma—the list goes on. But for me, Jacob Cain was the exception to this rule; he was malicious, and I knew it from this one meeting.

I was optimistic and thankful I would never meet him again.

After yesterday's flight and all the errands I'd run in town, I had slept soundly in the comfort of the king-size bed in my new room. Last night, I'd borrowed Vernon's spare laptop and reviewed the News site SINN to get an idea of what they were about. It

appeared that the job would be much like the management of a web-blog, but with News stories. I noticed the advertisements for medical care, insurance, and activities around the island like dining, water sports, and cinema.

Googling for other PI News sites, I reviewed the competition. The two sites that emerged titled PI News and Silver PI were jam-packed with advertisements in the sides, top, and bottom banners. Clearly, my mental statement before was a little naïve; the occupation would be a lot more than just blogging, but it didn't faze me.

The morning presented an eagerness in me to begin my new life.

Feeling confident, I left the bungalow just after midday, giving myself sufficient time to reach the Administration Complex for the interview.

Stepping outside from underneath the sheltered part of my uncle's bungalow, the sun beat down reminding me that this was new territory; a new world. I was living in the Caribbean now.

I walked down the driveway, admiring the view of the sparkling ocean and the few yachts I could see sailing in the distance.

Passing a couple of similar bungalows on my way down the hill, I hit the main road.

I immediately knew I'd made a ridiculous choice in wearing my pinstripe, navy-blue suit. My face grew a shine like a man who's been exercising and my shirt was already feeling moist. I'd left my red tie in my pocket knowing it would be too hot to wear, but that didn't help.

On the main road, my shirt was drenched within minutes. I felt stupid as sweat dripped off me like someone had doused me with a bucket of water.

The road itself was busy with cars. I peeked at my side to see drivers and passengers of the vehicles laughing as they peered out at me. The faces were clearly islanders, though they could have been from any Caribbean isle.

I ignored their laughter and continued down the road.

I walked past the huge gated mansion of the Governor's place and entered the main strip leading to Street Village—Mortigno's central hub.

Many buildings came into view.

I could see the hospital, financial firms, law firms, and coming closer into the centre, many restaurants and bars lined the waterfront. I passed the bistro where I'd first met Jacob Cain.

It will be fine, I reassured myself. If you get the job, just do your best and it will be fine. No one can fault you, if you do your best.

The ferry dock on the waterfront was busy as usual; mostly tourists taking the ferries to tour other islands around, or commuters who worked and lived on different islands.

The town was vibrant with activity; there was a build-up of motorist traffic and many obvious cruise ship passengers in their bright, holiday clothes dotted the streets. Male and female residents were easily distinguished by their apparel of shirts, trousers, and shoes. There was a huge mix of people too—I overheard American accents, British accents, and South African and knew from my prior visit that these were the principle nations that made up the expat community. The islands were comprised of around ten thousand born to the island and twenty thousand expats, creating a huge diversity. There were also expats from many other Caribbean

islands, and the Mortignan people classified them as ‘downislanders’ on account of their geographical location

Coming deeper into the centre of the town area, I passed the massive detached buildings housing the major banks. There were large department stores and many medical units with their own private pharmacies.

I tried not to look around too much—every motion was making me hotter and more dehydrated. My throat became dry and my stomach rumbled. Breakfast had been toast, nowhere near sufficient to nourish me. Vernon had told me he often ate out, so the fridge was quite naked.

Coming to a very open area, one huge glass building stood at the centre of a massive car park—the Administration Complex.

I wiped my soaking brow with my sweaty, wet hand—a useless action. I needed a restroom to find some paper towels and clean myself up.

Entering the revolving doors of the building, I checked the time on the clock behind the security personnel.

It was 12:40 p.m.

“Step through the scanner please and state the purpose of your visit,” said the security guard in front of me, who was dressed in a uniform similar to the police—sky blue shirt and navy-blue trousers.

I stepped through the scanner. “I’m here to see Jacob Cain,” I replied.

“Okay, sign in please.” He pointed at a clipboard on the side desk.

I wrote my name, the date, the time, and signed. “Where’s the restroom?” I asked.

“Straight ahead sir,” replied the security guard.

“Thanks, and where’s Jacob Cain’s office?”

“First floor. Enter the door labelled Ministry of Correspondence and Industry.

Ask reception there.”

“Thanks very much.”

I looked around at my surroundings. It was a modern facility with fierce air conditioning, already helping to cool my face and body. Tiled, hard floor mapped the lobby with carpeted seating areas at the sides. These areas were equipped with tables and soft leather chairs, presumably for visitors or as lunch areas. Two adjacent lifts leading to the higher floors stood in the massive lobby.

With Vernon as my escort around the islands, I recalled meeting Saul in this very lobby.

Saul was someone who enjoyed igniting political debates with his co-workers. What stood out to me was his apparent sincere interest to help me secure a job as a writer. It appeared like he’d succeeded too with my job interview minutes away. But the last time I was here, Saul had done one motion that also stood out to me.

It had been a simple response, but it had spoken subtle truths about Saul that stirred my distrust. I’d seen him at a bar and it had been packed to the brim. Saul stood at the side by himself. I too was by myself and when I saw his face, I thought it would nice to speak to someone who I’d been introduced to.

“On the hunt I see,” I’d said to him as I approached. The joke wasn’t taken well.

Saul had smiled and then walked off. That was it.

For the rest of the night, he didn't speak to me. Being new to the island, then being ignored like that, it seemed that his desire to help me had been something he'd said to impress my uncle, rather than genuinely wanting to help.

I'm overthinking it, I told myself. I was here and I was about to be interviewed for the job I'd desired. Fullstop.

Beginning to dry through the lobby's generous air conditioning, I darted into the restroom, grabbed several wads of paper towels, and dabbed my face clean. I undid the buttons on my shirt and reached into my armpits and wet chest with the paper towels. I put my red tie on and patted myself down once more.

Looking presentable enough in the mirror, I left the rest room and made a beeline for the lift; climbing the stairs would provoke my heat receptors again.

Reaching the first floor, I pushed open the glass door labelled Ministry of Correspondence and Industry to see an open plan office with cubicles, not unlike offices I'd worked in.

"Hi," I said to the receptionist who looked up at me like I'd just interrupted a profound moment with her lover. "I'm here to see Jacob Cain."

With no response, she picked up the phone. "Afternoon Mr Cain. Yes. A man is here to see you."

She put the phone to one side and glimpsed my face before rolling her eyes down. "What's your name sir?" she droned.

"Christopher Charles," I replied, attempting to remain upbeat.

"Christopher Charles," she said into the phone mouthpiece. "Okay." She dropped the phone onto the receiver with noticeable aggression. "Just wait there."

I turned to where she was pointing to see a couple of seats beside a coffee table.

“Thanks very much,” I said and took a seat.

I scanned the medium-size open plan office space. No different to any in London, people were typing away at their computers with a couple of curious faces looking in my direction.

“Mr Charles,” said Jacob, appearing at my side. He wore a white shirt, a burgundy tie, and black trousers with brightly polished black shoes. I got up and shook hands with him.

“Come with me,” he said.

I followed him down a narrow path adjacent to the wall and the office cubicles on the alternate side.

“Come in,” he continued, opening his door labelled *Permanent Secretary Jacob Cain*, and walking toward his desk.

Saul was inside, dressed in a white shirt, red tie, with black khakis. He was sitting on a sofa, using his mobile phone. “Hey dude,” he said. “So, you in or what?”

I smiled.

“Let’s not be so hasty,” said Jacob as he took his seat behind the over-sized mahogany desk. Vast, vertical windows behind him granted a fantastic view of the ocean, cruise-ship dock nearby, and the ferry dock further off. The office itself was spacious and clean. The stacked bookshelf to his left—my right—reaching just beneath the ceiling, gave Cain the look of a man who was worldly-wise and well-read. The comfortable love seat and sofa positioned around his desk, made for a

hospitable area. He even had his own compact fridge in the corner.

“This is an amazing office,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” replied Jacob. “So—” He clapped his hands together. “We’re just waiting on Doloris to get here.”

“I’ll be outta here then,” said Saul. “Later dude.”

“See you later,” I replied.

Saul’s huge frame seemed to bob as he walked out the door and closed it behind him.

“So, how are you finding it so far?” said Jacob.

“Things are a little slower,” I said, sitting down on the love seat. “Do you guys use Facebook here?”

“Of course.” He chuckled. “What, do you think we play the bongo-bongo drums and dance around the camp fire?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t mean it like that. Was just checking if—” I stopped, seeing that he wasn’t listening to me but scrolling through something on his iPad.

He picked up his desk phone and pressed a button on the handset. “Make sure Doloris comes straight in,” he said. He put the phone down and sighed loudly. “That stupid woman. I ought to fire her tomorrow. You can’t get good help these days.”

Like turning the page of a new chapter in a book, he switched the discussion. “So, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking, yeah. I want to join you guys. I spoke to my manager at Five’s about it and he’s okay so...The only problem, is that I have to spend two weeks in

training doing the day shifts, and I was hoping to do day shifts with you, and then nights at the bar. But this can't happen till I understand the bar processes.”

My mind was in two places as I finished my sentence; half my mind was disappointed with a knowing sense that this was a definite deal breaker—there was no way Jacob would give me the job with my fortnight of unavailability. The other half was relieved, feeling protected from this job opportunity, because deep down I knew. Working with Jacob Cain would be a nightmare.

He nodded. “Okay. Well we'll see what my business partner has to say. I'm okay with it, but it's a cooperative, so, she has to give the word.”

“Okay.”

Did he just give me the job? It seemed like he had.

We sat in silence for a minute and there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” said Jacob.

A short woman of about sixty-five walked in, only she looked more like she crept in. Perhaps it was the way her hands were outstretched ever so slightly, like a mosquito flying toward tasty flesh. She had a wry grin on her face and her eyes were sly-looking slits as if she deliberately didn't want to let too much light in. She breathed hard as she slowly moved to the front desk with two huge carrier-bags over her shoulders.

“Hello Mr Cain,” the woman's voice slithered. I assumed this was Doloris—Jacob's business partner.

“Hello Ms Frost,” Jacob replied. “Did you take the stairs?”

“Yes,” she panted. “The lift has jammed again.”

“Oh, okay. See what I mean about good help?”

He wasn't looking at me when he said it, but I assumed it was addressed to me.

Jacob and Doloris shook hands and she turned to face me. “You must be Christopher Charles,” she said.

“Yes, pleased to meet you,” I said, standing up, forcing a smile, and shaking her hand before returning to my seat.

Her response was delayed. “Doloris Frost,” she said.

“Ms Frost,” interrupted Jacob. “I was just saying that for us to give the green light on this project, we need your say-so. For me, it's a ‘yes,’ because as far as I'm concerned, he's a writer and we need a writer so we're good to go, but I can't go ahead without my partner's say-so.” He smiled. “The ball falls into your court Ms Frost. Did you have any questions or queries for Mr Charles?”

Every formality of ‘mister’ and ‘Ms’ that Jacob expressed, sounded unnatural. Who was he performing for? And to what purpose? This bizarre show couldn't be for me, could it?

“Well, Mr Charles—” she stopped and looked around to sit down. She plonked herself on the sofa, letting her bags fall and a huge sigh release.

“Hot day,” she said, fanning herself with her hand. “Let me just catch my breath.”

She breathed out another huge exhalation. “So Chris, we're looking for someone to fill the role of News Director and Marketing Executive.”

My entire body lit up at the title. *News Director and Marketing Executive.*

“We’ve been running for a month. We had two other journalists come in, and due to their...circumstances, weren’t able to continue. But we’re looking for someone who goes beyond the mark to get the story. An individual who’s also a great salesperson for securing advertisements for our News site. Have you seen our News site?”

“Yes, I have.”

“What do you think?”

“It looks nice,” I said with raised eyebrows. “Not sure about the yellow theme though, but—”

“It’s gold,” said Jacob “It’s gold. I chose that.”

“Oh, okay,” I replied, nodding my head. “I suppose that works to make yourselves unique. Um, what happened with the previous employees?”

Doloris looked at Jacob.

“Well, the last one we had, she couldn’t really deal with the role,” said Jacob. “Family issues. And the other one before. He wanted his entire family brought over from Saint Vincent, so we couldn’t accommodate him.”

“Did you look at our competitors’ sites?” said Doloris, changing the subject.

“Yes, I can see we’d have our work cut out for us,” I replied. “They have so many advertisements.”

“You *will* have to work for sure,” said Jacob.

Doloris chuckled. “So the job will entail you being both a journalist and a sales and marketing professional. You’ll also have to re-write all press releases with original titles and fresh words to make them our own. You will then edit and publish

all content from our contributor writers as well. We will provide you with a state-of-the-art camera because we expect you to take original photos to go with all our articles published. That about covers the general duties. Did you have any questions?”

“No. This actually sounds like the perfect job I was seeking out here.” I smiled.

“What is your background Christopher?” said Doloris.

“Well in my last occupation, I was an insurance underwriter, but my real passion lies in writing. I studied English Literature at university.”

“Not journalism?” said Doloris.

“Uh, no. I understand if that’s a problem, because I don’t know journalistic style.”

Doloris’ face seemed to darken.

“No, no,” said Jacob. “A writer, is a writer. Right Ms Frost?”

“Well,” she said, lengthening the word out. “It’s your call Jacob. I say we give him a test run and see what happens. We test him for a week and if he delivers the goods, we put him on probation for a month.”

“That sounds good to me,” said Jacob, nodding his head.

Almost as though Jacob knew things would be moving in this direction, he pulled a six-page contract with print on both sides from his desk drawer.

“Mr Charles,” he said. “If you’re really serious, we would like you to read through this contract as soon as possible and if everything is to your liking, we can get the paperwork sorted for you and have you working within the next few days.”

Things are moving fast, I thought. What’s going on? This is way too good to

be true.

I glanced the contract, then back at Jacob.

“I have a few questions,” I said.

“Shoot,” he replied.

“First, I’m not trained as a journalist,” I confessed. “I’m a writer. I need to make this clear. I have an English Literature degree. Do you need to see this or—?”

“No, we don’t need to see any of that. We will put you on probation for a week, then a month, right Doloris? Then three months where we will see if you’re up to the challenge.”

“Okay, but what about my Work Permit situation?”

“What about it?”

“Well, my primary Work Permit is with my job at Five’s. They’ll be training me during the day for the first two weeks before they put me on nights. After, they may have me on days and nights as a mix depending on where help is needed. I imagine this would really interfere.”

“Where there is a will, there is a way. You will learn that with Ms Frost and I, we’re a winning team. We only play to win.”

“Alright.”

I felt like my instincts had taken over with a brazen honesty that was attempting to protect me by forfeiting this job opportunity before it begun. Something simply wasn't right about it. I could see it in Jacob’s enigmatic stare and eagerness for me to get started. His round specs reflected the light just enough so I couldn’t see his eyes. And then there was Doloris, sitting there, seemingly unsure about hiring me

and looking like she was suppressing something dark behind her tilted forehead.

“The other major problem is I don’t have a driver’s licence or a car,” I said.

“Surely this will be an issue?”

“You don’t have a license?” said Jacob.

“I don’t. I’m trying to get one as soon as possible, but for now, I’m on foot.”

“Well, you will have to get that license quickly, but for now, you can hitch rides.” He nodded, agreeing with his own words.

“Okay, if that’s fine with you, no problem at all,” I replied.

“Any other questions Mr. Charles?”

“Am I expected to work on weekends?” I said with more boldness than I meant to.

“You may have the odd task to do here and there. Nothing major. A few little things. We’ll let you know. So, is that all okay?”

Staring at the contract, I raised my eyebrows, knowing that although this was my dream occupation—exactly what I came to the islands for—these were not *my* kind of people.

“Tell you what,” Jacob said, pushing further for my compliance. “Ms Frost and I have some business to discuss, so if you could read through the contract in reception, then come back to me if all is well, we can have you signed up and ready to go next week.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you very much.”

I stepped outside and returned to the welcome area, where the receptionist was painting her nails. She didn’t acknowledge my presence.

I sat down and began flicking through the wording on the contract. There were a lot of duties—excessive and detailed.

Absolutely everything appeared to protect Jacob and Doloris in all potential pitfalls.

In any losses of the most diverse range, they were shielded.

They had my time, with clauses indicating that even my weekends belonged to them.

They had my undivided devotion, almost like I was a shield for them, explaining that I was to be the only person responsible for the website, yet simultaneously anonymous with nothing accredited to me of the work that was published.

My wages were to be in cheques every fortnight, completely at their mercy if they felt I was worthy of pay or not.

Finishing reading, I was sure that the contract indirectly—and directly in some cases—said they had complete dominion over my entire life. It even specified that in resignation, I had to pay them a month's salary to get out of the contract or work a full month with them. I'd never seen this clause before in my previous jobs.

The occupation provided a studio apartment, making my eyes widen at the potential freedom I would have. However, it was in accordance with housing allowance and bills coming out of my salary. This didn't sit well with me. Part of the promotion that got me to relocate from the UK to the PI, was that my uncle Vernon had said I could stay at his place, rent and bills free.

The list of duties—numbering a vast multitude and very thorough—saw Jacob

and Doloris covered yet again with the additional clause:

This work is to be completed promptly and punctually with any extra duties deemed necessary by Jacob Cain and Doloris Frost.

That last sentence could literally mean anything they wish—possibly polishing their shoes, taking their clothing to the dry-cleaners, bringing them fresh coffee when they wanted, running errands for them in town.

The open-ended nature of all the clauses in the contract were completely in their favour.

I didn't like this at all, but this was the dream job I'd come for—to write and be published, even if I wasn't to be credited.

Fifteen minutes had passed before I returned to Jacob's door and knocked.

"Come in," said Jacob.

I pushed the door open.

"So, where are we and what's the challenge?" said Jacob, resting back in his chair.

"Well," I replied, looking at Doloris who kept her head down. "Just a few things really. I have a 'challenge' with this," I said, pointing toward the clause about paying housing allowance. "I already have a place to stay so in fact, I don't require the apartment at all."

And I don't wish to be paying housing allowance or utility bills.

"Oh no, you have to use the apartment," said Jacob. "That's your office and everything is set up there. But we can work it out. You don't have to pay housing allowance for three months, but after that, we will discuss a mutually beneficial

arrangement.”

“Okay, that sounds alright. The other thing. How will you be able to get me a part-time Work Permit so fast? I’ve been told it can take weeks or months. And won’t it be illegal for me to work two full-time jobs?”

“Mr Charles. Do you think I got to where I am right now without knowing a few of the right people?” he said, rising up and circling his desk, then sitting on top of it. “How old do you think I am?” He didn’t give me a chance to answer. “I’m thirty-nine Mr Charles. At thirty-nine, I’m the youngest Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Correspondence and Industry. Don’t worry about Work Permits or full-time job nonsense. The question is, are you up to the challenge?”

Doloris was smiling.

“Well if you guys can sort it out legally with Labour and Immigration, that’s fine,” I said.

“Mr Charles,” he continued. “You like this office, right?” He raised his open palms in admiration of his own surroundings. “How do you think I managed all this? I say again, don’t worry about the permit. I can take care of it. The main question, are you up to the challenge? Will you be able to manage the work? Will you be able to come through for us and make us number one?”

“Amen,” said Doloris.

I’d always been good at sales and website blogging—which I’d been doing for the past two years—appeared like training for this exact role.

“I should be able to manage,” I said. “But will you be able to accommodate me working at Five’s and not being able to drive yet?”

I repeated the question again with a mixture of uncertainty about what I was getting myself into, and joy that the job of my dreams was falling into my hands so easily.

“You’re going to get the driving situation sorted, right?” replied Jacob.

“Yes, I plan to take driving lessons and the examinations as soon as possible.”

“Well, we can accommodate you on that basis. But make sure you do it.”

“Okay. The only other thing I see is that it appears like I won’t have time for my own hobbies. I write my own fiction, blog, and go to the gym. So I need my weekends.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he said and smiled at Doloris as they both chuckled.

“I need to go to the gym myself actually. You think I’m getting fat?”

Jacob looked at both Doloris and I and clutched his stomach which was protruding over his belt line.

“Gym is always good,” I replied.

“Well, anyhow. You’ll have time to do your little things on the side,” said Jacob.

“Well, um, in that case Mr Cain, I’m fine to sign. Um...do you have a marketing and sales script for the advertisement sales side of the job?”

“No, just sell on the benefits of being with SINN,” Jacob said as if it was easily done.

“Okay,” I said and shrugged my lips. “And how will I go about getting stories? Do you have contacts?”

“We have a few sources—insider information—that sort of thing. We will direct you at first, but we want you to take some initiative. Really press for some deep,

investigative journalism.”

“Uh-huh,” mumbled Doloris. “That’s right.”

“The main thing I would suggest is to be in the court room and around town during your days,” said Jacob. “Find the stories. Go digging. Really get the good stuff and let our site be first with the articles. We want you to really make this role your own.”

“And you think I can manage without a car?” I asked, again apprehensive about the how easily I was being drawn into working for SINN.

“We will sort that out in due course once you get your license.”

“Okay.” I paused, feeling everything inside me scream *no* at this prospective job.

This is the perfect job role, I told myself. Just what I’m looking for. My family back home will be so happy to hear this.

“I’m good to sign,” I said.

“Excellent Mr Charles. Ms Frost, did you have anything to add?”

“Nothing but to say, we demand a lot Mr Charles,” said Doloris, tilting her head down. “We hope you can keep up to the challenge.”

“I look forward to the challenge,” I replied, driving a smile to my face. “And I’ll do my absolute best. Thank you very much for the opportunity.”

“One other thing Mr Charles,” said Jacob. “You may hear a lot of, shall we say, gossip on the islands.”

Doloris grinned.

“You may hear things about Doloris and I, but it’s all island gossip, that’s all.

Nothing to worry about. So just ignore these people. And never mention our names in affiliation with SINN. If anyone asks, just say it's backed by an individual that chooses to remain anonymous.”

With mild trepidation, I agreed. “Will do Mr Cain.”

ARE YOU INTRIGUED BY THE STORY SO FAR?

I NEED YOUR HELP

All I would ask is that you share your thoughts by leaving a comment on this page:
<https://stephen-l-france.com/your-free-gift-chapters-1-6-of-the-paradise-induction/>

And share this link on your social media accounts:

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Please also feel free to get in touch - stephen@wantingnothing.com

Thanks very much!

Stephen L France