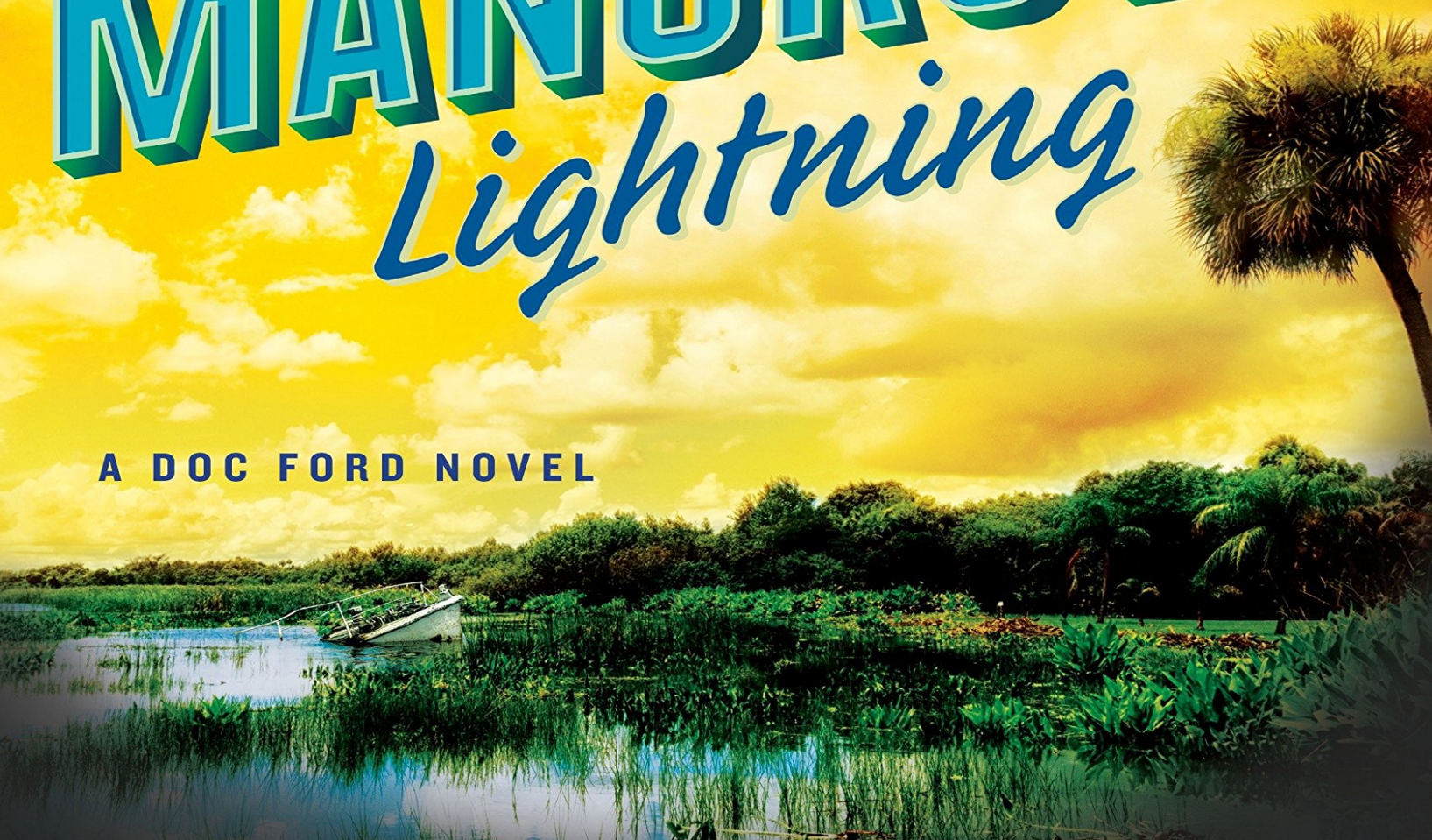


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# RANDY WAYNE WHITE

## MANGROVE *Lightning*

A DOC FORD NOVEL



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**MANGROVE  
LIGHTNING**

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS / NEW YORK



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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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Version\_1

***For dear Rogan and Rachael***



# Contents

*Also by Randy Wayne White*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

*Disclaimer*

*Author's Note*

*Map*

*Chapter 1*

*Chapter 2*

*Chapter 3*

*Chapter 4*

*Chapter 5*

*Chapter 6*

*Chapter 7*

*Chapter 8*

*Chapter 9*

*Chapter 10*

*Chapter 11*

*Chapter 12*

*Chapter 13*

*Chapter 14*

*Chapter 15*

*Chapter 16*

*Chapter 17*

*Chapter 18*

*Chapter 19*

*Chapter 20*

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

Your office sent bones in cloth bags. These bags have rotted and caused much chaos. When people came to claim them, it was not possible to identify individual sets correctly. Our hearts have no peace.

—A letter from Tung Wah Hospital, Hong Kong, to the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association regarding the repatriation of Chinese dead, San Francisco, 1928

## [DISCLAIMER]

Sanibel and Captiva Islands are real places, faithfully described, but used fictitiously in this novel. The same is true of certain businesses, marinas, bars, and other places frequented by Doc Ford, Tomlinson, and pals.

In all other respects, however, this novel is a work of fiction. Names (unless used by permission), characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is unintentional and coincidental.

Contact Mr. White at [WWW.DOCFORD.COM](http://WWW.DOCFORD.COM).

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is based on events that occurred in Florida and the Bahamas during Prohibition, as reported (often vaguely) by newspapers of the time. One of those events catalyzed several murders that remain unsolved, so I warn the reader in advance that I have created a solution that is wholly fictional and have changed the names of most of those involved. Details pertaining to smuggling liquor and Chinese workers are portrayed accurately, as based on those old accounts, and interviews done personally or by contemporary journalists. The same is true of Marion Ford's insights into biology, although, again, my personal suspicions creep in regarding exotics such as the invasive lionfish.

Florida was wilder than the Wild West during the turn of the previous century, and far more difficult to travel by rail or horseback. This is probably why reams were written about Tombstone, etc., but almost nothing about the cowboy smugglers who inhabited the Everglades. My interest in the topic spans forty years, so the old accounts held few surprises—until, while browsing issues of the *St. Petersburg Times*, I stumbled onto a reference to the Marco Island war of 1925.

War? This was news to me. Marco, now a prosperous coastal community, was, in those years, a Southwest Florida outpost inhabited by fewer than two hundred people, mostly fishermen and clammers.

I dug deeper, and found a series of articles on a “land war” that pitted homesteaders, squatters, and smugglers against a multi-millionaire developer, Barron Collier, who would ultimately open the region by building roads, a railroad, but first carved out his own county to provide the needed infrastructure. That infrastructure included a

handpicked sheriff, the sheriff's bloodhound and bullwhip, and his loyal deputies.

The headlines in the *St. Pete Times* during the summer of 1925 were tantalizing: "Developer and Settlers Near Blows . . . Deputy Sheriff Beaten, Disappears . . . Marco Island Calm; Collier Enlists 'Navy' . . . Governor Is Called Upon in Land War!"

The disappearance of the deputy, more than other events, struck me as a historical hub because it connected seemingly dissimilar elements: smuggling rum and Chinese workers, a developer's wealth versus inhabitants who made their own laws, and who bristled at efforts to bring law into the Everglades.

Journalist Denes Husty found this article that suggests why the deputy and his family suddenly "disappeared."

*The Fort Myers Press*  
April 18, 1925

A large mud hole on Marco Island, from which a terrible stench arises, is being searched today [by authorities] in belief that it might possibly hold the secret of the disappearance on February 19th of Deputy Sheriff J. H. Cox, [plus his wife, and two young children] for whom a state-wide search has failed to reveal the slightest clue.

Cox is the principal witness in some 19 indictments against smugglers and bootleggers in the Marco district, and a little over a year ago was badly beaten by a mob while arresting one of their number. Prior to his disappearance he had received several threatening letters. Cox paid little heed to the threats, but his wife, who is of a nervous temperament, lived in constant fear of the ruffians, it has been revealed. Investigation at Marco has only brought the news that he [and his family] suddenly moved away [without] disposing of most of his personal property.

A reward of fifty dollars has been offered by Sheriff W. H. Maynard for news resulting in the finding of the missing deputy and his family. Deputy Cox was described by Sheriff Maynard

as 50 years of age, 180 pounds, 5 feet 9 inches tall, wide face, red nose, “fighting gray” eyes and of a tall slender build.

Where Cox went and how is a mystery that Sheriff Maynard has been tireless in his efforts to unravel. Cities and ports of the state have been searched and all authorities so-titled, without the slightest clue being discovered.

Telling, huh? Years later, a deathbed confession by one of the accused smugglers confirmed that the deputy and his family hadn't just disappeared. They had been lured ashore, and murdered somewhere near a “bottomless” lake that was known, even then, as a place where saltwater fish such as tarpon could be found.

As stated, this novel is a work of fiction, but the scaffolding is based upon fact. Therefore, before thanking those who contributed their expertise or good humor during the writing of *Mangrove Lightning*, I want to make clear that all errors, exaggerations, or misstatements are entirely my fault, not theirs.

Insights, ideas, and medical advice were provided by doctors Brian Hummel, my brother Dan White, Marybeth B. Saunders, and Peggy C. Kalkounos, and my nephew, Justin White, Ph.D.

Pals, advisers, and/or teammates are always a help because they know firsthand that writing and writers are a pain in the ass. They are Gary Terwilliger, Ron Iossi, Jerry Rehfuss, Stu Johnson, Victor Candalaria, Gene Lamont, Nick Swartz, Kerry Griner, Mike Shevlin, Jon Warden, Phil Jones, Dr. Mike Tucker, Davey Johnson, Barry Rubel, Mike Westhoff, and behavioral guru Don Carman.

My wife, singer/songwriter Wendy Webb, provided not just support and understanding but is a trusted adviser. Bill Lee, and his orbiting star, Diana, as always have guided me, safely, into the strange but fun and enlightened world of our mutual friend, the Reverend Sighurdhr M. Tomlinson. Equal thanks go to Albert Randall, Donna Terwilliger, Rachael Ketterman, Stephen Grendon, my devoted SOB, the angelic Mrs. Iris Tanner, and my partners and pals, Mark and Julie Marinello, Marty and Brenda Harrity.

Much of this novel was written at corner tables before and after hours at Doc Ford's Rum Bar & Grille, where staff were tolerant beyond the call of duty. Thanks go to: Liz Harris Barker, Greg and

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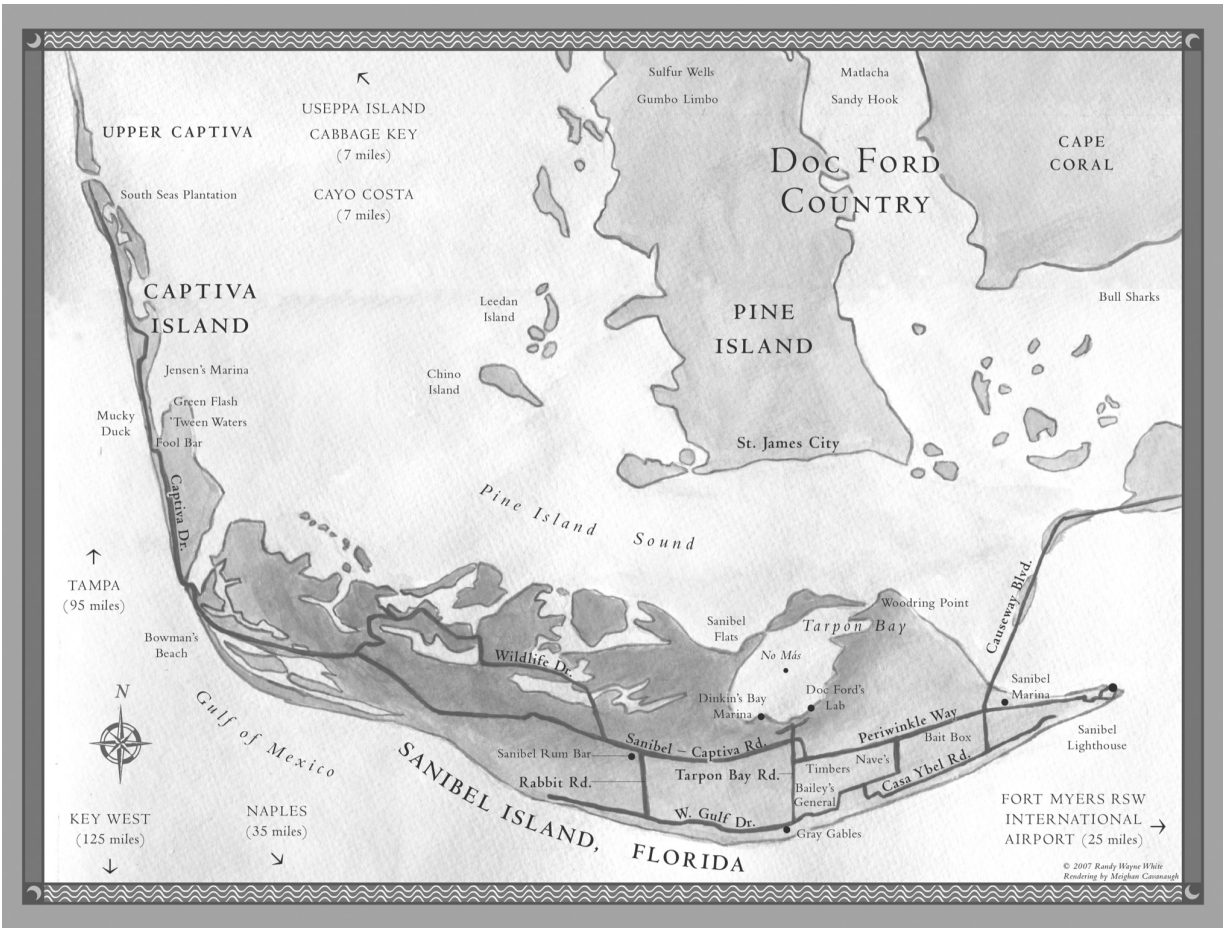
At Doc Ford's on Fort Myers Beach: Lovely Kandice Salvador, Johnny G, Meliss Alleva, Rickards and Molly Brewer, Reyes Ramon Jr., Reyes Ramon Sr., Netta Kramb, Sandy Rodriquez, Mark Hines, Stephen Hansman, Nora Billheimer, Eric Hines, Dave Werner, Daniel Troxell, Kelsey King, Jenna Hocking, Adam Stocco, Brandon Cashatt, Dani Peterson, Tim Riggs, Elijah Blue Jansen, Jessica Del Gandio, Douglas Martens, Jacob Krigbaum, Jeff Bright, Derek Aubry, Chase Uhl, Carly Purdy, Nikki Sarros, Bre Cagnoli, Carly Cooper, Andrew Acord, Diane Bellini, Jessie Fox, Justin Voskuhl, Lalo Contreras, Nick Howes, Rich Capo, Zeke Pietrzyk, Reid Pietrzyk, Ryan Fowler, Dan Mumford, Kelly Bugaj, Taylor Darby, Jaqueline Engh, Carmen Reyes, Karli Goodison, Kaitlyn Wolfe, Alex and Eric Munchel, Zach Leon, Alex Hall.

At Doc Ford's on Captiva Island: Big Papa Mario Zanolli, Lovely Julie Grzeszak, Shawn Scott, Joy Schawalder, Alicia Rutter, Adam Traum, Alexandra Llanos, Antonio Barragan, Chris Orr, Daniel Leader, Dylan Wussler, Edward Bowen, Erica DeBacker, Irish Heather Walk, Jon Economy, Josh Kerschner, Katie Kovacs, Ryan Body, Ryan Cook, Sarah Collins, Shelbi Muske, Scott Hamilton, Tony Foreman, Yakhyo Yakubov, Yamily Fernandez, Cheryl Radar Erickson, Heather Hartford, Stephen Snook Man Day, Anastasia Moiseyev, Chelsea Bennett, Guitar Czar Steve Reynolds, and Shokruh "Shogun" Akhmedov.

Finally, thanks to my wonderful sons Lee and Rogan for helping finish another book.

—Randy Wayne White  
Telegraph Creek Gun Club  
Central Florida





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Rendering by Meghan Cunningham

# 1

**O**n the phone, Tomlinson said to Ford, “When the deputy’s wife and kids disappeared, moonshiners might’ve dumped their bodies in the lake—it was during Prohibition. It wouldn’t be the first time karma has waited decades to boot justice in the ass.”

“Tootsie Barlow told you that story?” Ford, a marine biologist, was referring to a famous fishing guide who ranked with Jimmie Albright, Jack Brothers, Ted Williams, and a few others as fly-casting pioneers in the Florida Keys.

“His family was involved somehow—the Barlows go way, way back in the area. I don’t know how yet, but I will. He’s in bad shape, so I need to take it slow, but *you’re* the one who told me about the lake—Chino Hole. That’s the connection. The access road cuts through Tootsie’s property.”

“I had no idea. He moved to the Everglades?”

“Smack-dab in the middle. One of those little crossroads villages like Copeland or Carnestown. The property’s been in his family for years. I’m driving down this afternoon. Since he quit guiding, it’s probably easier for him to wake up and see sawgrass instead of the Gulf Stream. The endgame, dude, for watermen like us, it can be pretty damn sad.”

“I’ve heard the rumor,” Ford said. “As far as your story goes, I’m still lost.”

“So’s Tootsie. How many fishing guides put away money for retirement? He’s broke, which is bad enough, but now he’s afraid that

God has singled out his family for punishment. Like a conspiracy, you know? Not because of something he did, more likely something his father or a relative did. The cops won't listen, his preacher doesn't believe him, so who else is he gonna call but the Right Reverend, yours truly."

Tomlinson, an ordained Rinzaï Buddhist priest, seldom employed the honorific "Right Reverend." The title had been bestowed by a Las Vegas divinity mill after cashing his check for fifty bucks.

"Tootsie wants you to put in a good word with God, I get it. I still don't see what this has to do with us . . ."

"He wants someone to convince the cops he's not crazy. And there's another connection. The deputy who disappeared was J. H. Cox. That ring a bell? It should."

"When was this?"

"Nineteen twenty-five. A few years earlier, a woman was murdered by a man named Cox. Same area; near Marco Island. I don't know if it was the same man, but your Hannah Smith is a direct descendant of the woman he killed."

Mentioning the biologist's ex-lover, Hannah, was a calculated risk to catalyze Ford's interest. In the background over the phone, Tomlinson could hear a steel drum band. "Hey, seriously, where are you?"

Ford, who was in the lobby of the Schooner Hotel, Nassau, Bahamas, said, "I'm in Lauderdale. At a convention for aquarium hobbyists. I'll get back to the lab late tomorrow. Hopefully."

"Bahia Mar, Lauderdale?"

"Close enough. Look . . . I've got a talk to give and I'm still working on my notes." As he spoke, the child-porn dealer he'd been tailing stepped to the registration desk. Ford covered the phone and moved as if getting into line.

When he rejoined the conversation, his boat bum hipster pal Tomlinson was saying, ". . . Tootsie's story is historical fact. I've got the old newspaper stories to prove it. In August 1925, Deputy Cox, his wife, and two kids all disappeared the night before a bunch of bootleggers went on trial. Marco Island or somewhere at the edge of the Everglades—get it?—all within a few miles of Chino Hole."

"Moonshiners would need fresh water," Ford reasoned while he watched the clerk encode the porn dealer's room key.

“That’s who the newspapers blamed, but there was other nasty crap going on at the time, which I’m just starting to research. You ever hear of the Marco Island war?”

“Come on, you’re making this up.”

“It *happened*, man. Same time period. A bunch of heavy hitters had their fingers in the regional pie—Al Capone, probably Joe Kennedy, too, but they weren’t the worst. The elite rich were stealing homesteads, and smuggling in Chinese illegals to boot.” Tomlinson sniffed, and added, “Lauderdale, huh? Dude, the satellite must’a stopped over Nassau, ’cause I swear can I smell jerked chicken.”

Ford replied, “Call you back,” and hung up as the clerk addressed the porn dealer by name for the third time—standard, in the hospitality business—then handed over a key in a sleeve with the number 803 written on it and circled.

“I’ll be checking out in about an hour,” Ford told the clerk when it was his turn.

There were ceiling fans in the lobby and panoramic windows, beyond which sunbaked tourists lounged by the pool. A brunette in a red handkerchief two-piece was sufficiently lush and languid to spark a yearning in the biologist—an abdominal pang he recognized as discontent.

*Focus*, he told himself, and returned to his encrypted notes. It became easier when the brunette stood and buttoned up her beach wrap. Every set of poolside eyes followed her to the door.

An hour later, the porn dealer reappeared in the lobby, wearing shorts and flip-flops, and exited toward the tiki bar.

Ford shouldered his computer bag, and crossed the lobby to the elevators.

---

**F**rom the eighth floor, Montagu Bay was a turquoise basin encrusted with slums and ox cart traffic on the eastern fringe. Spaced along the waterfront were resort compounds; postcard enclaves that were separated from Nassau’s realities by armed guards and tastefully disguised concertina wire.

The biologist no longer wondered why tourists came to places like this. People seldom traveled. Not really. Travel was too damn unpredictable. Instead, they contrived daydreams. They chose template fictions that matched, or came close enough to, the vacation they wanted to describe to their friends back home.

Near the elevator was a house phone. He dialed housekeeping, and told the woman, "I'm a dope. Can you please send someone up with a key to eight-oh-three? I locked myself out."

"Your name, sir?"

"James Lutz." That was the name the porn dealer was using.

"When security arrives," the woman added, "show them your passport, Mr. Lutz."

"Have him bring a bucket of ice, too," the biologist replied.

He was palming a twenty-euro bill when a kid wearing a name badge appeared, used a passkey, and bowed him into the room. "Hang on, I've got something for you." Inside the closet, as anticipated, was a wall safe, which he fiddled with before giving up. "Damn . . . must have punched in the number wrong. What's the default code? I need my wallet."

The kid opened the safe, and stepped back in deference to this solid-looking American who exuded confidence, but in a friendly way that suggested he was also generous.

"Thank you, Mr. Lutz," the kid said, accepting the twenty. No eye contact; he backed out of the room.

"You're supposed to see this." The fake passport earned only a dutiful glance.

*He has no future in the security trade,* Ford rationalized when the kid was gone. *I did him a favor.*

On the other hand, probably not. Child pornography was a billion-dollar international industry. Nassau was the ancillary stronghold for a Russian network that branched into Haiti, Indonesia, and the Middle East, particularly Muslim regions where daughters were treated as chattel. Children provided a steady income to jihadists who enjoyed beheading infidels. When word got out that a low-level dealer had lost incriminating files while drinking at the pool bar, Jimmy Lutz, or whatever his name was, would beg first for his life, then a painless bullet.

If he lived that long.

Wearing gloves and a jeweler's eyepiece, Ford secured an adhesive keystroke transmitter to Lutz's laptop. The translucent tape was two inches long and thinner than a human hair. Once mounted on the screen's black border, it became invisible, which Ford confirmed, before returning the laptop to its case.

Next, the safe. He photographed the contents: a wallet, two passports, a bundle of cash, and half a dozen ultra-secure biometric thumb drives. Three platinum thumb drives, three stealth black. Ford's employer, a Swiss agency, had anticipated this, but had provided him with only four stealth versions. He switched out the three black thumb drives, and repositioned each exactly as he'd found it before closing the safe.

Ford had also anticipated that Jimmy Lutz was in Nassau on a working vacation. On the bed, a Dacor dive bag lay next to a leather suitcase and a valet parking ticket. He unzipped the bag and removed a buoyancy compensator vest attached to a four-hose regulator.

The gear looked new.

Using a multi-tool, he popped a pin, removed the regulator's cover; next, a lubricating seal and the main diaphragm. A stainless valve seat and plunger were cupped within. With a drop of water-soluble glue, he seated an object that would clog the system when it broke free but would dissolve without a trace within twenty minutes. He did the same to the backup regulator, then returned everything to the bag.

There was no such thing as a zero signature robbery unless the victim wasn't alive to report the crime. No guarantees when or if it would happen, but a nice touch if the man had booked an afternoon dive.

When Ford was done, he consulted photos of the room to be sure it was exactly as he'd found it, then cracked the door and eyeballed the hallway.

Damn it . . . Lumbering toward him was Jimmy Lutz after only twenty minutes at the tiki bar. Maybe he'd left his wallet, or needed cigars. Ford hurried past the bed, pocketed the valet ticket, then exited onto the balcony, closing the curtains and sliding doors.

"You . . . bastard . . . get your hands off me," a woman said from nearby. British accent. She sounded more startled than mad. A

neighboring balcony was empty, but billowing curtains suggested the woman was in the adjoining suite. Ford's attention wavered until a slamming door told him Lutz was in the room. Lights came on within, then heavy feet flip-flopped toward him, as the woman, voice louder, threatened, "I'll call the police, by god, if you don't get out of here right now."

Lutz heard her; curtains parted. Ford hugged the wall while the man peered out, his face inches away through the glass. Satisfied the woman wasn't on his balcony, Lutz engaged the dead bolt and swept the curtains closed.

Ford was trapped. He waited, hearing a mix of sounds from the adjoining suite: a clatter of furniture; the woman gasping, "Damn you . . . that *hurts*," and other indecipherable noises that signaled a struggle. Or was it a kinky twosome enjoying rough love?

Inside Lutz's room, a toilet flushed. A door suctioned curtains, then banged closed.

The porn dealer was gone.

Ford grabbed his tactical bag before testing the sliding doors. Yes, they were locked. He swung a leg over the railing, ignored the dizzying distance to the beach below, and made the long step to the next balcony, which was screened by landscape foliage. A potted plant crashed to the tile when he pushed his bag through, then followed. Beyond billowing curtains, through open doors, the room went silent.

Standing, looking in, he was prepared to apologize to the couple until he accessed the scene. A fit man wearing medical whites and a name badge glared back—a massage therapist whose table had collapsed on the floor during a struggle. Askew on the table, still battling to cover her body with a sheet, was the brunette he'd seen by the pool.

"Didn't know you was there, sir," the man glowered. "She want to call the constables, fine, but what you think they'll say? She's the one requested MY services."

In Nassau, even extortion threats sounded as melodic as a woodwind flute.

"Are you hurt?" Ford asked the woman. He pushed the curtains aside and stepped in.

She was confused, and mad enough to sputter, “I want this bastard fired. If you work for the hotel, I want to file a—”

“That man don’t work here,” the therapist said. Until then, he’d been backing toward the door. Now, looking from Ford to the broken pottery outside, he figured out the situation. “Yeah, what the police gonna say? This guest hire me, take her clothes off, her own free accord. I already know who they gonna believe.”

“You cheeky son of a bitch.” The woman tried to scoot away; the sheet fell. She folded her arms to cover herself until Ford yanked the sheet free and tossed it over her. He wore a baggy white guayabera shirt, tails out to cover the waistband of his khaki slacks. Again he asked the woman if she was hurt.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “For Christ’s sake, call the manager . . . or do something. This man tried to rape me.”

“Naw, come on,” the therapist said in a soothing way. “That ain’t true. You want to know the real problem? This fella come here to rob you, that’s what they’ll figure out. Why else he climb over that balcony? You being such a wealthy lady, they’ll know a poor boy like me wouldn’t do nothing so stupid.”

“Bastard,” the woman said, while the man grinned.

“Ain’t you the spicy one,” he countered. “I’m not the type to make trouble, so tell you what. Mister, I’m willing to leave polite-like—but I want compensation for all the fun I missed, plus the coin you lost me. Sound fair?”

“Very fair,” Ford said. He reached back as if for a billfold but came up with a 9mm pistol and leveled the sights at the man’s nose.

“Where do you want it?” he asked.

The massage therapist, no longer smiling, said, “Shit, man. What the . . . Don’t make me take that away from you, ’cause you won’t like what happens next.”

Staring over the sights, Ford cocked the pistol, and spoke to the woman: “Get some clothes on and call the police, if that’s what you want. But not from here. There’s a house phone near the elevators.”

The therapist turned to her. “See there, Miz Cobourg! He plans to shoot me ’cause he don’t want witnesses,” while the woman asked Ford, “Is it true? The constables won’t believe me?”



“Not a chance,” Ford said. “You made the appointment through the concierge?”

“Of course,” she said, then understood the implications. “Oh hell. Yes, it was a damn fool thing to do, I suppose.” She got to her feet with the sheet around her, no longer afraid, just angry and undecided.

“It happens a lot in places like this. If you’re worried about headlines, I’d pack your things now and not look back. Or just forget it.”

“Who *are* you?” she asked again.

“In my bag, there’s a roll of duct tape,” Ford replied. Then, to the therapist, said, “Get on the floor or I’ll shoot you in the knee.”

The woman, kneeling over the tan tactical bag, said, “I shouldn’t have come. I didn’t think I’d be recognized here.”

---

**H**e waited for the elevator doors to close before dialing valet parking. “This is Mr. Lutz, room eight-oh-three, would you bring my car around? A lady friend will be there in a minute. Please load her bags.”

When Ford stepped out into the salt-dense heat, the brunette, wearing sunglasses and a scarf, was in the left-side passenger seat of a raven blue Range Rover. He folded a twenty-euro note around the valet ticket, and confided to the attendant, “If a man shows up claiming to be me, it’s the lady’s husband. Understand?”

“A jealous one . . . Yes, sir,” the attendant agreed.

Ford added another bill. “Can you blame him? I’ll double this if you give us time for a quiet dinner.”

The woman didn’t speak until they were heading north on East Bay Road. “Did you shoot him?”

Puzzling, the cool way she was handling this, both now and in the room. Instead of hysterics and pointed questions about why he was armed, she remained subdued; no . . . distracted, as if she had more important matters on her mind.

“I taped his mouth, that’s all. I can drop you at another hotel, but that might not be smart. Depends on how the police deal with it.”

“Then what was that noise as I was walking to the elevator? I heard something, a sharp bang or thud. It came from my room. For god’s sake, please tell me you didn’t.”

Ford pretended to concentrate on the road. “If there’s no reason to stay in Nassau, there are daily flights to Cuba. It’s a lot more scenic—and safer.”

She lowered her window, saying, “Dear Jesus, you did. You shot him.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten in the car if you believed that.” He looked over at her profile, the wind tangling her hair. “Or maybe you would’ve.”

“I was unaware I had a choice. A man with a gun comes over my balcony, I assume you’ve been paid to shadow me. A security agent of some sort—who else carries a roll of tape and three passports in his bag?”

For a moment, she made eye contact; an up-down sweep, then was done with him. “I’ll admit you don’t look the part. More like a math prof I fancied at university. The type you surprise in the stacks at a library, who spills soup on his tie.” She touched a button and lounged back. Her window slid into place, sealing out the monoxide din of traffic. “Aren’t those always the ones who fool you?”

Ford braked left-footed, swung around a pedicab, and turned abruptly onto Baillou Hill Road, before consulting his mirror. It was four miles to the south side of the island. He drove for a while.

“Cobourg—I’m not familiar with the name. What should I call you?”

“I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“For now, at least. He said you’re wealthy. Are you an heiress or an actress?”

Cynical laughter was the response. “Come off it, please. You know precisely who I am. Who hired you?”

He’d been wrong. Her aloofness didn’t signal distraction, nor was she subdued. It signaled *indifference*. A woman who didn’t care what happened. It suggested she was very rich, or had powerful connections . . . or was teetering on an emotional ledge.

Ford’s eyes darted from the mirror to his phone. He touched redial and handed it to her. “A friend of mine should answer. When he does, tell him to book two seats for us to Lauderdale and two seats to

Havana. The earliest possible flights; doesn't matter which airlines. He's got my name and Amex number. You can text him the rest of your information. He's not the type to carry a notebook."

"Just like that, huh? Four seats, only two people. Are we traveling separately?"

"Stay in Nassau, if you want. Keep in mind police don't report sexual assaults here—not if a tourist is involved. It's bad for the local economy."

Her window scrolled halfway down, then up again. "Filthy little island, isn't it? I was shocked when that clod recognized me. I certainly didn't register under my real name." She paused. "The boy at the valet called you Mr. Lutz. I assume that's not your name. You nicked some poor fool's rental car, didn't you?"

Tomlinson's phone was ringing. Ford heard it while he studied the mirror, where a beat-up white van had joined a black Nissan.

Before putting the phone to her ear, she asked, "Why don't you speak to him? He's your friend."

"I need both hands to drive." He downshifted and accelerated; made a sharp turn onto Cowpen Road, then swung abruptly onto a sand trail that ribboned downward through a landslide of shacks, the Caribbean Sea beyond.

"We're being followed," he said. "Keep your head down while you talk. One of them has a gun."