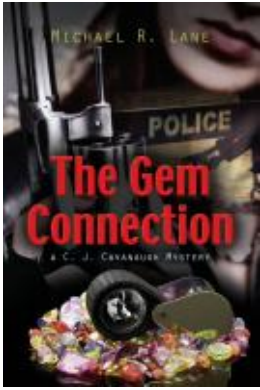


MICHAEL R. LANE

POLICE

The Gem Connection

A C. J. CAVANAUGH MYSTERY



Clinton Windell is murdered and robbed of twenty million dollars in uncut gems. C. J. Cavanaugh is hired to root out the murderers. There's only one catch. C. J. and his partner must keep mum they're working the case. Between the killers, Homicide Detective Pendleton, and their client, C. J. must utilize every ounce of cunning to keep him and his partner out of prison or the morgue long enough to capture the killers...

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ISBN: 978-1-63491-356-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2016

First Edition

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

While I changed back into my civvies I wrestled with my concerns governing what I saw when I left Mark Strait. Someone had been watching. Had I led them to Strait? My instincts told me yes just as they had prompted me to stick around to find out more. I doubted it was one of my constant shadows. Without previous knowledge of where I was going, there was no way they could have been prepared to follow me under those conditions. I had a choice. Should I leave my partner alone while I staked out Strait's log house or return to Portland to watch Renita's back and have Strait fend for himself? My decision was obvious.

On the way back to Portland, I recognized six people in four of the vehicles who had followed me to Detroit. My little excursion into the woods threw them for a loop. They maintained tight tails all the way to my office.

I did not see one vehicle tailing me north. It was a pine green Ford pickup that had trailed me from the time I left Frank Strait until the time I entered the Marion County Clerk's Office. He used his cell phone more than the others. I assumed he was the flagship of the whole operation coordinating vehicle switches and the like. The driver of the pickup managed to keep distance enough so I couldn't get a good look at him. A precaution the others apparently did not find necessary. If he wasn't one of my phantom employers' agents then who was he? Maybe he was the sunburst at the Windell mansion. What did he want?

On my final deep cover mission in South America, being an outsider my room was constantly searched. I kept my field journal in one of the few places no one ever rifled. In Bebe Assassino's room beneath a loose floorboard in his closet. One day I was jotting down an entry when I heard Bebe Assassino approaching. He was talking to one of his bodyguards. I wasn't expecting his return for another hour. Bebe Assassino had been checking the cocaine packaging process in the southwest quadrant at Cardozo's insistence. I slid the closet door nearly shut leaving enough of a crack to see through, put back my field journal and silently replaced the floorboard.

Bebe Assassino walked in wearing all white. A uniform of affluence around those parts. He was smoking a cigar. Bebe Assassino removed his Panama hat and laid it on his dresser. With a large bandanna, he wiped his face and neck. He walked around the room and closed all of the drapes grinding out his cigar in an ashtray atop the dresser. For a moment, Bebe Assassino sat on the edge of the bed staring listlessly out into space. He looked like a child then, dreaming, pondering, and not at all grown-up. When he walked my way, I moved away from the crack. I listened as his footsteps came closer. I readied myself to attack. My plan would be to knock him unconscious but kill him only if I had to.

Bebe Assassino never opened the closet. I heard sounds similar to the ones I made when working free the floorboard I used to hide my field journal. There was a moment of silence. Bebe Assassino walked away from the closet. I peered back through the crack. He sat on the bed with his back to me. Beside him he'd set a padlocked black metal box. It was badly dented and slightly rusted. He set it in his lap, opened it and spent the next half-hour looking at its contents. I couldn't see what he was looking at but my guess was it was cash, mad money if you will. I waited, sweating, suffocating in that stifling closet until he was done. About fifteen minutes after Bebe Assassino left, I was able to slip out unnoticed.

Like a cold dark liquid curtain, the rain returned with a fury around Newberg. It was a pelting reminder from the heavens of what

it took to wash away our sins. I called the office. "Cavanaugh Detective Agency," Renita answered.

"That's *Investigation* Agency," I said.

"Hey C. J.! How'd it go?" Renita said.

I filled Renita in what Strait told me.

"Sounds like he could be our man," Renita said.

"I don't think so," I said. "I believed his story."

"Carl was able to obtain the financial records for the Bellingham Board Members including Andrea Bettencourt," Renita said. "He e-mailed us a copy."

"Anything noteworthy?"

"It appears that Harvey Bettencourt was not only reinstated but he received a twenty-five thousand-dollar fee every month from Bellingham for miscellaneous services. A fee approved exclusively by Clinton Windell. When Harvey Bettencourt died those fee payments were doubled and directly deposited to Andrea Bettencourt's personal checking account. No one else on the board had that sort of special allowance or showed any conspicuous leap in income."

"Interesting," I said.

"Blackmail," Renita said.

"Probably but for what," I said.

"Maybe Andrea Bettencourt knew about the smuggling?"

"Strait didn't mention anyone else being aware of that."

"Sounds as if there were several people involved in their operation someone else could have popped up."

"It's worth looking into," I said. "There's a DEA agent by the name of Jon Adams who works out of the San Francisco office. Ask him to get all of the information he can on a San Francisco strip club called the Tulip Room that burned down back in around 2000. We're looking for anything he can drum up on the former owners of the Tulip Room and any employees -- particularly dancers who were working there at the time."

"C. J., I didn't know you were into exotic dancing. You know I do a mean -- never mind." Renita was being true to her word. Maybe this Three's Company living arrangement wasn't such a bad deal after all.

“While he’s at it have him see what he can find out about Buzz Cut,” I said. “Give him the details on how Windell was murdered and see if he can match anyone to that particular M.O.”

“He’ll do this for us why?” Renita asked.

“Because he owes me a few favors,” I said. “We go way back.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Renita said. “How is a DEA agent going to get that kind of information without arousing unwarranted suspicion?”

“Tell him to keep a low profile,” I said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“Anything else?”

“That should do it for now. Call me if you need anything.”

“You’re what I -- forget I said that,” Renita said.

“Done,” I said.

“When will you be back in the office?” Renita asked.

I glanced at my car clock. “About three,” I said.

“I was thinking of leaving early,” Renita said. “I need to go by my place and grab a few things.”

“Wouldn’t you rather wait and have me escort you?” I asked.

“I can handle it,” Renita said.

“How about giving Ernest a call?” I said. “I’m certain he wouldn’t have a problem seeing a lady home.”

“An interesting thought,” Renita said, “but I’ll save the vulnerable female bit for a more appropriate time.”

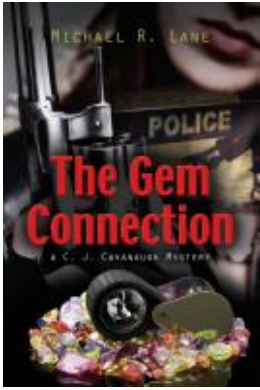
“Don’t forget your weapon or your caution.”

“Not a chance,” Renita said. “I’ll head directly to your place when I’m done.”

“See you at home,” I said adding, “Renita! You’re doing an excellent job.”

“Thanks C. J.,” Renita said. “Be careful.”

That was advice Mark Strait needed more than me, I thought. “Right back at you,” I said.



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