

Tourist in Paradise

A CW McCoy Novel

Jeff Widmer

Published in the United States in 2016 by Allusion Books, Sarasota,
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FIRST U.S. EDITION

ISBN 978-0-9964987-6-0 (print)
ISBN 978-0-9964987-7-7 (e-book)



For Karen, Mike and Katie, with love.

1.

THE AIR FELT THICK AND wet. Lightning slashed the clouds and thunder detonated over the Gulf of Mexico. In the rental lot of the Spanish Point International Airport, palm trees swayed like frat boys. Mercury vapor lights buzzed. The sky dropped another foot.

A hard rain was gonna fall.

By the time Walter Bishop dropped me off at the car rental counter, the display on my cellphone read 12:01 a.m. Despite the hour, the rental agent looked crisp in white shirt and black slacks. Tall, early twenties, with black hair slicked forward in a rapper quiff. His nametag read *Ken*. No Barbie in sight.

The agent stood at a computer terminal in front of a banner that read, "Spanish Point—Welcome to Paradise." The photo showed a man in a white shirt, striped tie and madras shorts leaping through the surf with a smiling woman and young girl, both in swimsuits and sarongs. At least the women had dressed the part.

Ken handed over the keys and a copy of the paperwork. "Here you are, Ms. McCoy. You're in Number Three. Enjoy your stay."

He smiled. He had a right to look happy. This was Southwest Florida after one of the worst winters on record, when tourists had fled south like refugees. I should have been happy, too, because I'd moved to this beach town two years ago, although trouble with money and men had thrown a bit of sand in my face.

I considered correcting Ken's assumption that I was a visitor—he should have known, he'd looked at my license—but I kept that thought to myself. Score one for self-restraint.

Walter had the parking lot to himself. Leaning against his gold Mercury Grand Marquis, arms folded, jaws snapping gum, he looked every inch the former state police commander and proud owner of a forty-one-foot sloop. Not exactly your typical beach

bum, he still carried a weapon. Louie, his vintage black Labrador retriever, stood on the passenger seat with his head hanging out the window. All this time in the South and Louie didn't know better than to wear black.

I walked to slot number three and beeped the remote of a white car that could have passed for a Hyundai, Toyota, Ford or an enameled rickshaw. The front looked like the helmet of an imperial storm trooper. The back bore a Florida license plate.

Walter walked to the car. Last winter, while helping me take down an enraged investor in a bank-fraud scheme, he took a bullet in the thigh. He still walked with a slight limp, but when I'd asked how he felt, he'd always say, "Fine."

I slid into the seat and started the car. "Why is it that half the rental tags in this state begin with the letter J?"

"They used to begin with Y and Z, until the governor banned the practice."

"Why?" Even after midnight, the August heat made my clothes feel like a sausage casing. I cranked the knob for AC. The system fought back with a blast of hot air.

"Carjackings and robberies near Miami International."

I adjusted the mirrors. "How'd that work?"

"Gangs would tail a tourist out of the airport based on stickers and tags. They'd bump the car from behind. Tourist pulls over, puts up a fight, gets popped." Walter snapped his gum for emphasis.

In the distance, thunder rolled off the horizon. "When was this?"

"Nineteen ninety-two, right after Hurricane Andrew."

The air blowing out of the vents smelled like the wrong end of a vacuum cleaner. I adjusted the fins and clicked on the headlights.

Walter leaned on the doorframe. "So tell me why you need a rental."

"I'm showing a house."

"You always rent cars at midnight?"

The sky crept closer to the ground. I looked for the stalk that controlled the windshield wipers and sighed. "I got a last-minute call to show a condo on Spanish Key and had to return Cheryl's car.

You'd think the cops would let her take a patrol wagon home for the night."

He crossed his arms and grinned. "You're diligent."

"I'm broke, remember?"

"What happened to the SUV?"

"I loaned it to someone."

"To whom did you loan it?" His grin tempered the mocking tone, but only a bit.

"Chet."

He smiled to reveal a gap in his top teeth and curled two fingers in a "come on and spill it" gesture.

The car's clock read 12:06 a.m., the temperature gauge eighty-six. I sighed. "You're not going to let go of this bone, are you?"

He shook his head.

"Chet, my auto body guy."

"Ah." His smile grew wider. "And what did you hit this time?"

"A pole, all right? I was pulling out of the marina lot—you know they won't let you back in—and this sign came out of nowhere and clipped the bumper. Totally did not look where it was going."

He laughed and walked to the Merc. "I'll follow you home. Wouldn't want you to get ambushed by a traffic light."

I slammed the door with enough force to fly the rivets back to South Korea and headed down the access road to University Parkway, one of the main East-West highways in Spanish Point. We sailed across the railroad tracks and into the northern part of the city, encountering little traffic at this time and season, when well-heeled residents traveled to cooler climes and the tourists headed back to Canada and the Continent.

The few houses here stood far apart, guarded by cement-block walls with peeling white paint. Not the sign of a prosperous neighborhood. I rarely showed property this far north. The rich retirees preferred gated communities and five-acre ranches east of I-75. I preferred them, too, since I worked on commission.

At the cross street I hung a right onto Orange Avenue and headed south into a fist of rain. Fat drops smacked the windshield,

then ratcheted up the volume. I checked the mirror. Walter hung back so far his headlights had disappeared.

The street numbers had dropped from the fifties to the thirties when a car fell in behind me. I glanced in the mirror and saw its glittering image edge closer. When I slowed to let it pass, the car lurched forward and rammed the back of the rental, not enough to set off the airbag but hard enough to jar my teeth.

I jammed the brakes. "What the . . ." I yelled as a black Honda with tinted windows and dual exhaust pipes spun a hundred and eighty degrees and came to rest twenty feet in front of the car, blocking the road and blinding me with its high beams.

A short black kid in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans bounded from the passenger side, raising a handgun as he ran. *Hands and eyes, eyes and hands*, I reminded myself. *Watch the eyes and hands*. My heart thundered, my vision narrowing to focus on the weapon. Ducking beneath the dashboard, I searched my ankle for the Beretta .25 only to remember I hadn't carried since I'd shot that officer in Pennsylvania. I came up to see the black kid pointing the gun at my head and screaming for me to get out of the car.

Things happened fast. I heard Walter yell "Freeze!" and the black kid fired a round that splintered the windshield. Another shot slammed the kid's shoulder and took him to the pavement. I looked for the driver, a light-skinned male, his features obscured by the blinding headlights. He glanced at his buddy, ground the gears and barreled north, forcing Walter into the ditch.

The kid on the highway rolled in pain. Walter climbed onto the crown of the road and kicked the boy's weapon out of reach, then backed away and asked, "You all right?"

"Yeah," I said. My breath felt ragged. I inhaled deeply, willing my heart to slow. "You get the tag?"

"Enough," he said.

My stomach clenched as Walter moved his gun toward me but he must have changed his mind about asking me to hold the weapon. Flipping open his cell phone, he called 9-1-1, asked for police and fire rescue and disconnected.

The kid hugged himself and moaned and rocked on the double yellow line just as the sky opened wide, the rain mixing with blood as it soaked his clothes.

"We need to help," I said.

With his weapon trained on the boy, Walter tossed his keys to me. "There's a first-aid kit in the trunk."

Arms shaking, I grabbed a checkered blanket and red plastic box marked with a white cross and knelt near the boy. He looked about fifteen with a scraggly mustache and a burst of acne on his forehead. With his high top fade, he resembled Will Smith in the "Fresh Prince of Bel Air."

As shock set in, the kid stopped yelling and stared at me with eyes the size of quarters. Walter had shot him in the meaty part of the right shoulder, as far away from the heart as he could and still hit body mass. I cut away the shirt and, using scissors, tape and a large square of gauze, pressed the makeshift bandage to the wound. He groaned when I tipped him onto his side. The exit wound looked worse. Cutting away the shirt, I stretched the remaining gauze over the hole and taped it to his skin. The patches wouldn't stop the bleeding but they'd slow it.

Leaning back on my heels, I glanced up at Walter. He stood ramrod straight, gun at his side, a living shadow backlit by the headlights. Between us, rain pelted the pavement, turning the stones to shards of glass.

I bent my head toward the kid. "Why'd you come after us?"

He stared over my shoulder, eyes glazed, blood trickling from a bitten lip. I pulled the blanket over his torso, propped his head on the plastic case and tucked the cloth underneath. Then I backed up to where Walter stood.

"He's not going anywhere," I said and heard a faint tremble in my voice.

"Trust but verify."

"You going to toe him in the ribs to make sure?"

Without taking his eyes from the kid he holstered his gun. "How's the car?"

"Drivable, if you don't mind bullet holes." Rain streamed through my hair and soaked my collar.

He shook his head. "You know what this is about?"

"Robbery for drug money?"

He glanced at me. "Anyone after you?"

I shook my head. "Does he look like a pro?"

"They had to pass me to follow you."

In the distance, sirens split the air. I leaned against the rental to steady my legs and felt the water soak my pants. "What do you think?"

He stared over my shoulder into the dark. "It's starting again."

2.

THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE Spanish Point Police Department resembled a six-story sculpture of aluminum and glass, with a wall of windows that gave officers a clear view of other people having fun. I'd come here last winter to meet with Tony Delgado after fugitive financier Bobby Lee Darby had abducted my grandfather. Pap had survived. Bobby Lee had not.

We waited in a lobby that could pass for a dentist's office and stared at magazines until a door clicked and my neighbor, Officer Cheryl Finzi, emerged in her summer uniform, dark blue spandex top, black cargo shorts and duty belt, her expression as severe as her clothes.

"Hey," I said, resisting the urge to give her a hug. "You coming over for spaghetti night?"

She stood about five-seven, with chipped red nails and frazzled brown hair with blond highlights. "Maybe. Tracy's got a lot of homework."

She led us through a door and along a corridor lined with cubicles. "Last night, you're lucky you weren't killed."

"Give us some credit."

"I should give you a gun, but I know you wouldn't carry it."

We reached the elevator. Cheryl swiped a fob over the panel and punched the button for the sixth floor.

I hooked a thumb toward Walter. "Any word about filing charges against Wyatt Earp?"

"It's up to the state attorney, but if you ask me, not likely. It was self-defense and he's licensed to carry concealed." She snapped her gum.

The doors opened and we swept down a corridor lined with floor-to-ceiling windows. In the park below, mothers with strollers

sat on benches while their kids swooped down slides. I felt a pang of envy.

Despite a slight limp, Walter set a brisk pace. "How's the shooter?"

"He'll live," Cheryl said, "but he won't talk."

"What can you tell us about him?" I asked.

"Officially, nothing."

I glanced at Walter. He pursed his lips.

Cheryl blew out some air. "You're going to pester me until I spill my guts so here's the short version: Demarcus Williams, age sixteen, 411 Martin Luther King Boulevard. Made it as far as the eighth grade and dropped out. No record until last month."

I asked, "What happened last month?"

"He was tagged for firing a .22, nobody hurt—same caliber as the slug they dug out of your rental, by the way."

"And the kid?"

"The juvie judge released him, custody of his grandmother."

"Where does she live?"

"Public housing," Cheryl said.

"The Plaza," Walter added.

I asked what will happen to the kid.

"They'll patch him up and send him to detention until he can make bail."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then he'll give up the driver and we can all go home." We stopped in front of Tony Delgado's office. Cheryl gave three sharp raps on the door and yelled our names. "Don't forget to congratulate the new L-T," she said and walked down the hall.

Tony Delgado hadn't changed. He looked broad and dark, possessed of a presence that reminded me of a tiger keeping pace with the humans outside its cage. He had short black hair, small ears and a scar that bisected his chin. Today he wore a white shirt with a faint pattern and no tie. The rolled sleeves made the veins in his forearms pop. He was, I hated to admit, as distracting as ever.

"Have a seat." He motioned to the only chairs on our side of the desk and clicked his computer.

I crossed my legs and leaned forward. "I understand congratulations are in order."

Delgado tapped the keyboard. "Or condolences."

"How long before you make division commander, lieutenant?"

Swiveling his seat, he gave me a strained smile. "A long time if this keeps up. Run me through what happened this morning."

First, I had to make a point. "Are you filing charges against Walter?"

He folded his hands on the desk. "There are no street cameras that far north, so it's your word against the defendant. But ballistics will show the shooter discharged his weapon—a no-brainer, I know—and he doesn't have a permit."

"And that means?" I asked.

Delgado looked at Walter. "You'll have to testify but it's obvious you felt your life was in danger and could not take cover or retreat."

Walter clasped his knee. "You find the car?"

"In a junk car lot off McIntosh."

"Prints?"

Delgado shook his head. "Wiped clean. We found it under a sign that read NO TITLE, NO PROBLEM."

"Lieutenant," I said. "I didn't know you had a sense of humor."

"Department issue." He turned to the computer and said to Walter, "You're licensed to carry concealed."

Delgado knew that. I'd seen the responding officers check Walter's permit and ask him to surrender his weapon."

Still looking at the computer Delgado said to me, "You're not."

A chill ran the length of my spine. I replayed the scene with Officer Nicholas Church as he aimed a .357 at his wife and daughter, watched him hit the floor as the slugs slammed into his chest. I hadn't carried a weapon since.

I shook my head.

"This isn't official, but if you'd shown a weapon, the kid might have run."

"He would have shot me." Or worse. I could have shot him.

The computer clicked. A printer whirled. "You're lucky to be alive."

I swallowed. "You're the second person to tell me that today."

"Four dead so far this year," Delgado said. All carjackings, all international tourists."

"Why international?" I asked.

"Easy marks," Walter said.

I shifted in the chair. "I don't fit the bill."

"How would they know?" Delgado said. "You were driving a rental from the airport. It's night, it's Florida, every car has tinted windows. Even we can't tell who's inside."

I bit my cheek. "And the only pattern is that they're all bump-and-robbs."

"Eight this year," Walter said. "Three gone bad."

"Very bad." Delgado ticked them off his fingers. "Canadian driver in January, a Swede in March and a German couple last month. Husband and wife were shot. The daughter got to watch."

Walter leaned forward on his elbows. "Leads?"

"None." Delgado picked the report off the printer and slid it across the desk. "Anything you want to add?"

"I'd like to talk to Demarcus," I said.

Delgado gave me a hard look. "I can't advise it."

"Why not?"

"You're the victim."

"I am *not* a victim." I returned the stare.

"You're one of a handful of people to survive an attack."

I gave him a tight smile. "So you'd like to keep me around."

"You're a witness to either a felony robbery with a handgun or an attempted homicide, depending on how the state attorney wants to handle it. I don't want you within a hundred yards of the suspect."

"What do think is going to happen?"

He scowled. It looked pretty good on him. "I don't want to give the judge an excuse to toss the case."

My phone buzzed. Another text from Ginny Alexander, demanding to know when I would return her daughter. I erased the message.

Walter webbed his fingers over a knee. "You're sure this was random."

I felt another chill. It had to be random. The players in Bobby Lee Darby's bank-fraud scheme were either dead or headed to jail, including his wife, Ginny Alexander. I doubted the family of Nicholas Church would send a couple of punks to avenge his death. And I hadn't heard from my father in twenty-five years . . . if he was even alive.

Delgado, thrumming his fingers on the desk, interrupted my thoughts. "Is it possible that you were the target?"

Taking a deep breath, I ratcheted down the tension in my voice. "I don't think so, but I'd like to know who hired Demarcus Williams. What's he have to say?"

"He doesn't like hospital food."

"You cut a deal?"

"We told him that, because of his age, we'd show leniency if he gave up the driver."

"How'd that go?" I asked.

"He says he never saw the guy before last night."

"You testify, you die," Walter said.

Delgado grimaced. "You lie, you die. That's how it works down here in the Badlands."

He rose and picked a navy blazer from a coat tree. Sliding an arm into a sleeve, he held the door and said, "Have you seen Darby's kid lately?"

"Junior?" I shook my head. Walter and I had followed him and his sister Claire in an effort to find Bobby Lee and Pap but I hadn't seen Junior since.

"You?" Delgado looked at Walter, who shook his head.

The lieutenant led us across the hall and opened a door to a dark observation room outfitted with one-way glass. The adjacent interrogation room was brightly lit. No table, no chairs, just a bleak gray box paneled in metal slats. Three people stood inside.

Arms crossed, Cheryl Finzi took up a position in the corner. I could only see the backs of the other two. The man in the chalk-stripe suit had ragged strands of straw-colored hair poking over the

collar of a white shirt. The other one stood half-a-head taller, his shaved scalp glistening under the spotlights.

I felt my stomach tug as Delgado flicked a switch on the wall and we listened to the voices of the two men, one high and light, the other low and rough. Over a shoulder Delgado said to me, "Is it possible that Junior wants revenge?"

The taller of the two men wore a dark hooded sweatshirt and jeans with threads poking from the torn parts. He'd stuffed his hands into his back pockets but the sleeves rode up to reveal a pair of tattooed wolves snarling from his wrists.

Robert Darby Junior turned sideways, his jaw blue as a gun barrel, the bones of the mandible sharp, a vein pulsing in his temple. He stared at the window as if he could see through it.

My stomach jumped and sweat pricked my palms as I remembered the night I defended Melissa Cunningham in the parking lot of the Roadhouse. Then the man in the banker's suit turned and I stared into the boyish face of Mayor Philip Cunningham, Melissa's father. More to the point, the husband of my new boss, the real estate tycoon, Casey Laine.

"Shit," I said.

Walter and Delgado stared at me.

The mayor wore a shirt with narrow blue stripes and a red tie adorned with polo players. He made the spotless room around him looked dirty. I'd never seen hizzonor out of context and the image jarred.

"Well, what do you know," Walter said.

I cleared my throat. "They can't hear us, right?"

Delgado checked a rack of equipment. "Sound's off."

"What's Junior doing here?"

"He's suspected of stealing a guitar from the mayor's house on Largo Key."

I'd seen that house. Laine and Cunningham had landed a three-story showcase with sweeping views of the Gulf and enough beach to open their own resort.

"Has he been charged?"

"We're still talking," Delgado said.

"I understand why Phil Cunningham's involved," I said.

Walter finished the thought. "But why is he here."

"He says he was giving the kid lessons," Delgado said.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The guitar went missing," Delgado said, "along with an amp they call a cube."

Walter asked, "What kind of guitar?"

"Nineteen-fifty-eight Les Paul sunburst with a maple top. Worth about two hundred grand."

I whistled.

Walter crossed his arms. "When was this?"

"Last night. His wife reported the theft this morning. Since Mr. Darby was the last person to use the guitar, we invited him here for a talk."

Walter nodded toward Junior. "And he called the mayor instead of a lawyer."

Delgado lifted the edge of his lips. "The mayor said he loaned the guitar to Mr. Darby."

Mr. Darby was maybe four or five years older than his sister Claire, twenty or twenty-one at most. He paced inside the interrogation room, hands twitching as if they couldn't wait to curl into fists. Unless you're O.J. Simpson, not the actions of a collector.

"The mayor's on the board of Sun Coast Generations," Walter said. "He's mentoring the kid."

"That's what he says," Delgado said.

"And he wants Junior released into his custody?" I asked. "Is that why he's here?"

"He doesn't think it's necessary to file charges, thinks his wife overreacted," Delgado said. "He says he's trying to provide jobs for the kid and his friends."

"Putting up lawn signs," I said.

"It is an election year," Walter said.

"Too bad," I said. "He's worked hard to build that program. I hear he'd do anything for those kids."

Walter grunted. "Getting into a pissing contest with his wife won't help."

"Speaking of which," I said. "Are we done here? I'm going to be late for my first day at work."

"I think," Delgado said, "your new employer might want you to cooperate."

"My immediate supervisor," I said, "is a fifty-year-old matron straight out of the Old Testament."

"Cissy Barton," Walter said, "the office manager."

The men traded smiles.

"Oh, come off it," I said. "Half the office has to attend this gala tonight, the great unveiling of the convention center, and I need to be there. Or else."

"Or else what?" Delgado asked. "Cissy will have your job?"

"Job my ass," I said. "She'll have me cleaning toilets."

I watched Delgado's reflection in the glass as he stifled a smile.

Movement in the interrogation room caught my eye.

"OK," I said. "You didn't invite us to play Peeping Tom. Why are we really here?"

The lieutenant tilted his head, his skin like polished copper. "You recognize him as the driver?"

"The driver wore a sweatshirt with a hood," Walter said.

A light bulb went on. "The mayor gave him an alibi," I said.

"He says they were jamming after a campaign rally."

"So," I said, "even though you think his story's crap. . . ."

"Doubtful," Delgado said.

"Doubtful crap, you can't put Junior in a lineup, not with hizzonor here."

Delgado looked at the ceiling. "Not without probable cause."

"Not with the city commission threatening to cut the department's budget."

Walter crossed his arms. "Or question him without consequence."

A second bulb lit. "But we can."

"I wouldn't encourage it," Delgado said. "He could be dangerous."

"That doesn't explain why he would come after me. I didn't kill his father."

"Maybe," Walter said, "he thinks you did."

"You still taking care of his sister?" Delgado asked.

"I'm trying. Half the time I don't know where she is." I regretted the words the moment they left my mouth.

Walter turned from the window as the trio in the interrogation room headed for the door.

So did Delgado. "Maybe he thinks you kidnapped her."

I stuck out a hand to block the door.

"You think Junior's behind this. This and the other tourist attacks."

Delgado opened the door. "At this point, I don't think anything."

"But the mayor doesn't make house calls for guys like Junior."

Phil Cunningham emerged from the room, followed by Junior. Hands on her utility belt, Cheryl took up the rear. As we collided in the hall, I caught Junior's eye. He had the stare of an alligator.

"CW," Cunningham said in a voice that could have filled a stadium. He pumped my hand and made immaculate eye contact. "What are you doing here? I thought Casey said you start work today?"

"We had a bit of an adventure." I gave him the abbreviated version of last night's bump-and-rob and glanced at Junior to see if he'd react. He didn't.

"The lieutenant was just telling us about that." The mayor looked me up and down, lingering a bit too long on the private parts. "Good thing you weren't hurt."

"Fast thinking on behalf of my partner." I introduced Walter.

"You're the guy with that classic sailboat," Cunningham said.

Walter gave a curt nod. The men shook hands and stepped back, like boxers touching gloves before a fight.

"You know Robbie." The mayor gestured toward Junior and favored us with his thousand-watt smile, the mentor introducing his protégé.

"We've run into each other," I said.

We locked eyes and I felt a revulsion that pushed hard, like a hand on my chest, along with a startling sensation, a gravitational

pull that went beyond the schoolgirl attraction to the bad boy in leathers and ink.

Cheryl touched me on the shoulder. "I'll stop by," she said and disappeared. Delgado excused himself and crossed the hall to his office. Mayor Phil shook my hand. "Welcome aboard, we'll see you tonight," he said and winked. Taking Walter by the arm, he asked about renting a sailboat for a whistle-stop tour along the Gulf Coast. They moved toward the elevator. Junior followed. Walter and the mayor disappeared.

Before he turned the corner, Junior paused.

I stopped and felt a cold draft blow down the corridor. *Eyes and hands, watch the eyes and hands*, I thought but said, "What do you want?"

Wrists bound with tattoos, he pointed two fingers in the military "go" signal. "You killed my father."

My heart thudded against my ribs as his voice bounced off the tile.

"His business partner killed him," I said. "I don't even carry a gun."

"How'd you like it if someone killed *your* father?"

That stopped me. By all reports, Ward McCoy was dead. Anger quickly replaced surprise. "How'd you like it if I kicked your ass?"

Junior spread his arms in a mock crucifix, the snarling wolves pulsing under the lights. "What, here? Surrounded by cops?"

I took a step forward and reached for the pepper spray I kept in my pocket.

Cocking his fingers, Junior let the hammer drop. "Watch your back, babe."