

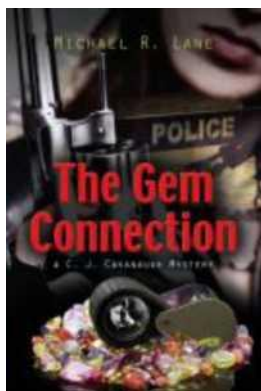
MICHAEL R. LANE

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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# **THE GEM CONNECTION**

**Michael R. Lane**

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## CHAPTER ONE

A sapphire Jaguar XJS convertible cruised onto the circular driveway of a Mediterranean-styled, Southwest Hills mansion with all the stealth and agility of its namesake, its headlights beacons through light rain and descending fog. Water beads reflected like liquid diamonds upon its shimmering shell. Maneuvering around the concrete fountain, it whispered past a blind statue of Apollo, banking smoothly toward six connected garages east of the mansion. Clinton Windell pressed his fat thumb on the wide red button of his electric garage door opener. The Jag coasted into a well-lit space, wide enough for two of its kind. The garage door automatically closed. Minus the whispering engine, the garage was as quiet as a tomb.

Windell grabbed his alligator briefcase, calfskin gem bag, and Baitz doll out of the trunk. To his left was the Bentley Sedan. To his right were the 1965 Alvis TE21 saloon, 1952 Lambert Simplicia, and 1924 Dagmar petite sedan. The missing Ford Explorer meant Genevieve was not home. He would tell his wife his great news as soon as she returned.

Windell walked down the corridor that connected the garage to his mansion. Motion sensors turned lights on and off as he entered and exited their detection fields. The walk gave him a chance to reflect on his good fortune. It had been a glorious day. Amsterdam was his *coup de main*. When he told the Bellingham Jewelers board he would personally handle the next major purchase, his enemies had been delighted. Those who called for his head had falsely wished him well with energetic handshakes and cynical

smiles. His friends counseled against such a plan in light of mounting dissatisfaction amongst board members who wanted him ousted.

Clinton showed them he was still on top of his game. Delivering twenty-million dollars of first-rate gemstones, once cut, polished and set into precious metals would be worth twenty times as much.

The mutinous board members who blamed Clinton Windell for dwindling sales of the largest fine jewelry chain in the northwest would be shamed into silence. Even Andrea Bettencourt, who wanted his CEO spot bad enough to kill for it, would not have sufficient votes to unseat him. Delaying his overthrow would buy him enough time to complete his plan. After which, Andrea Bettencourt could have his seat with his blessings.

Clinton was dismayed upon entering the kitchen, and then irritated that his butler, Edward, was not there to greet him. Through the kitchen, dining room and living room he walked with a confidence many correctly perceived as arrogance. A tailored Armani suit gave his thick, tall body elegance he could achieve in no other way. When it became apparent his butler was missing, Clinton resolved he would fire Edward for leaving his daughter alone.

Second door to his left at the top of the carpeted stairs was his daughter's bedroom. The master bedroom he shared with his wife was next door.

Clinton set his gem bag alongside his briefcase outside the master bedroom door. He heard familiar voices coming from his daughter's room. He crept up to his daughter's bedroom door holding the Baitz doll behind his back. When he looked in on Pamela, she was asleep in her Pocahontas pajamas curled up with Soochow, a doll Clinton had brought back for her from Canton. The Wizard of Oz was on the TV screen watching Pamela. Dorothy had accidentally doused the wicked witch of the west with water.

"Aaaaa! You cursed brat!" the wicked witch screamed. "Look what you've done! I'm melting! Melting! Oh what a world. Who would've thought a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness?" Clinton watched the witch melt like hot candle wax until all that remained was her black dress, black cape and pointed black hat heaped amongst hissing steam.

Clinton placed the Baitz doll on Pamela's dresser. He stopped the DVD and turned off the entertainment system. Gently, Clinton lifted Pamela from

her bed. His six-year old daughter was as light as a bag of cotton in his hands. In the cradle of his arms, Pamela stirred briefly. Clinton threw back her Cinderella bedspread and tucked her in. "Sweet dreams, precious," he whispered, kissing her forehead. He positioned the Baitz doll on the dresser so Pamela would see it when she awoke, turned off her lamps, and softly closed the door behind him.

When Windell switched on the master bedroom ceiling light, he noticed his wall safe was open. Two steps later, he felt a dull pain near the base of his skull. Dazed, Windell fell to his knees. The second blow propelled him into darkness.

A man wearing a Woodstock II T-shirt, blue jeans, tie-dyed ski mask, black leather jacket, gloves and dusty Doc Martens closed the door. Another dressed in crisp military green, polished combat boots, black ski mask, and black leather gloves put away his blackjack and checked Windell's pulse. The assailants stared at each other. Their identical clear blue eyes met. They smiled identical smiles. Woodstock checked the gem bag. Military knelt by the unconscious body. A nod from Woodstock made them smile again. Military turned Windell over. Each man grabbed Windell under an arm and sat him upright on his bed. Clinton looked as if he had fallen asleep reading a newspaper or viewing television.

From customized blue leather cutaway holsters hidden beneath their jackets, the two men detached silver forty-four Smith & Wessons fitted with silencers. Military squeezed off a shot. The forty-four spit a bullet that ripped through Windell's left temple, obliterating the right side of his face. Woodstock followed with one through the heart.

They holstered their weapons assessing their gruesome work. Side by side with calm fascination, they regarded the speckles and rivulets of lambent blood, splattered flesh and splintered bones juxtaposed against that, which remained whole of Clinton Windell. Woodstock whispered into Military's ear, "While life often imitates art, death is an original masterpiece." Military grinned and nodded. Each man grabbed an arm and crossed it over the now crimson torso of the deceased. With a thumb's up, they agreed, their masterpiece was complete.

Woodstock closed the wall safe. Military picked up the gem bag. Woodstock switched off the light and closed the door behind them.

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Six rain soaked weeks I'd been following Antonio Farhletti everywhere except the bathroom and had nothing to show for it. The former 1990 Miss Oregon, Roxanna Farhletti, suspected her husband was having an affair. So did I, several in fact, but I had no proof.

I'd tailed the President of Diva Computer Software to the elegant Tea Room at the posh Heathman Hotel. The downstairs held about sixty people and was three-quarters full, Farhletti sat at a round white marble table in front of the glowing fireplace that had an original Claude Gallee' hanging above it. He was having a dry martini—stirred, not shaken—with Judith Hardy, vice-president of the Software Development Division. I remembered her from a brief meeting they had earlier that day. Farhletti had just fired her boss, Andrew Tollman and the president of International Marketing, Deborah Slade. Hardy was next in line for Tollman's position and this meeting was set up to discuss her promotion. I sat in the mezzanine with a clear view of the whole scene.

Hardy had changed out of her double-breasted business suit into a tomato red, cashmere mini-dress, polished red pumps, small ruby earrings, and a tasteful ruby necklace. A tiny silver ankle bracelet rounded out her ensemble. The dress complimented her sleek figure. She had undone her French braid so her thick red hair fell onto her slender shoulders like a fine mink collar. Away from the office, she seemed a different person. Her smile was less restrained, more generous. Her freckled skin appeared to glow and her oval face came alive with expression. If I didn't know better, I would have assumed her no more than a bright-eyed college student rather than a hard-nosed, dynamic V.P. of one of the largest software companies on the West Coast.

Antonio Farhletti was another story. He wore a tailored gray herringbone suit, smoky gray silk tie, white tailored shirt with engraved silver cufflinks, waxed black leather shoes, platinum Rolex, and his plain 24 ct. gold wedding band. His slicked back, short, raven hair made him resemble a low-level hustler rather than the debonair sophisticate he really was.

Though Farhletti sat with his back to me, I could see his reflection in the glass screen in front of the fireplace. Clean-shaven, angular face, beak-like nose, narrow brown eyes and narrow mouth was a face that I had



become all too familiar. He was a regimented man of meticulous habits. Every morning he awoke at five. By five-thirty, he began his five-mile run. Monday morning he met with his domestic executive staff via teleconferencing, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoon his personal trainer took Farhletti through a workout designed to tone and strengthen. Tennis on Tuesday and golf on Thursday doubled as business meetings with high-end clients. In between, he had private meetings with executive officers and spoke with his international executive team via videoconferencing. Monday through Friday, he took his wife to dinner at Brasserie Montmartre. On two of those nights, he met with Karen Carbo, president of Manufacturing, and Deniece Thomas, president of Research & Development at their homes.

When I discussed his late night pow-wows with Mrs. Farhletti, she said she was well aware of her husband's private meetings. She mentioned it was common for Antonio to meet with his officers at their homes. Even so, she admitted, she had barged in on both Carbo and Thomas during one of their private sessions only to find them fully clothed and hashing out some company business. Like me, she still believed something was amiss. Like Mrs. Farhletti, I was unable to get the goods on her husband to prove it. The only things that seemed out of character for Farhletti this week were the firing of two Division heads and this public meeting with Hardy.

Back at the Heathman Hotel, The Dave Marshall Trio was playing a mediocre rendition of "In A Sentimental Mood." Having settled into the soothing ambiance of vibrant conversations, music and soft lights, it was difficult for me not to relax. I had to keep reminding myself I was there for one reason, to nail an adulterer.

I don't usually take domestic cases. They are too convoluted for my investigative taste. Insurance companies, financial institutions, corporations, they pay well and on time when you do a job to their satisfaction. Private clients are far more finicky and less profitable. My only reason for taking this particular case was that six of the Pacific Northwest's finest PI's had come up empty on this guy. That intrigued me, that and the grand a day plus expenses.

Hardy sat across from Farhletti. Smoke from the cigarette she held in her left hand, curled about her face. When I was ten, I had a deaf uncle who taught me to read lips. The key is to forget sound and watch the mouth form

the words. In the beginning, I could only pick off a few words. Gradually sporadic words flowed into concrete sentences. Then one day, it became as easy as dreaming. I've not only mastered the skill but the ability to prevent people from realizing what I'm doing. It's a secret I keep from even my closest friends. Hardy's cherry red lipstick made it easy.

Most of the conversation centered on finalizing a software package called U-T, expanding into foreign markets, increasing domestic sales and sizing down. Hardy asked Farhletti about Benton Lawson. She said he was still causing problems at the Beaverton Research Complex. Farhletti's response brought a sinister smile to Hardy's face, the type I'd seen plastered on Colombian drug members who had permission to kill someone who'd been a pain in the ass. Right then I knew Hardy was not only good at what she did but that she enjoyed it.

We were in the middle of our respective drinks when a man joined them. A well-groomed corporate type, wearing an expensive suit, moved as if he were in an ingratiating spotlight. Farhletti seemed indifferent to his presence. Hardy greeted him as though she expected him. The stranger took the seat to the right of Farhletti. That put him in position for me to read his lips. The man made small talk. Hardy appeared interested. Farhletti was gracious but seemed bored. Farhletti excused himself. The man waited until Farhletti was out of sight before he spoke again. He told Hardy all had gone as planned and they could proceed with the next step.

"No hitches," was his response to an apparent question from Hardy, whose mouth was obscured by her coffee cup. The man removed a sealed, padded manila envelope from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to Hardy under the table. On the man's manicured left pinkie was an enormous emerald ring. Hardy quickly slipped the envelope into her purse.

"Everything you need is in that package," the man said.

I watched the man with the enormous emerald ring leave, not knowing what to make out of what I had just witnessed. Farhletti returned. He asked Hardy what their visitor had wanted. She smiled seductively and said, "Her body." Farhletti said he could understand his interest in such an admirable asset, and then moved to sit at the right of Hardy.

Hardy and Farhletti toasted with a glass of expensive champagne, kissing after taking a sip. Hardy looked around. I tapped my hand on the table while looking at the band, which were playing a tolerable rendition of

Billy Strayhorn's "Passion Flower." When I checked my watch, I could see out of the corner of my eye that Hardy was still staring in my direction. I looked around, appearing annoyed, as if searching for someone who was late. It seemed to work. By the time I took a sip of my Club Soda and lime, Hardy's interest in me had ceased.

Farhletti caressed Hardy's cheek. Hardy kissed his palm. Farhletti placed his hand on her knee and whispered something into her ear that made her green eyes light with anticipation. When Hardy put a slender arm around Farhletti's shoulders, I thought they were going to do the nasty right there. I waited a few minutes before I left. My instincts told me I would need my telephoto lens. I already knew what they would be doing, and where.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I called Renita from my car on my way to questioning the board members. All was quiet to the point Renita was bored. Sutherland's fingerprints came up empty. There was nothing new on our mystery employer. I had become less concerned about our employer and more concerned about the killers since my visit to the Windell Estate. Renita had followed up on acquiring names of people at Diva Computer Software who were capable of creating a DVD like the one we received. I asked Renita to narrow the list. That required field interviews to get a feel for motives and access. Renita was happy to do it.

On the one hand, I was glad to get Renita more involved in fieldwork. On the other hand, she was making me nervous. I'd seen what effect carrying a loaded weapon had on people. There is an anxious desire to pull that trigger. You are nagged by a twisted impulse, a morbid curiosity, to discover what it's like to shoot someone.

"Renita be careful," I said. "This is not a game. Use your gun if you have to *but* only if you have to. Is that clear?"

"I'm not a psycho C. J."

"I know. Just be careful."

"Sounds like someone's a *bit* concerned," Renita said.

"More than a bit," I said.

"I knew I was wearing you down. Don't fight it honey. Come to mama."

In my honest opinion, I didn't think Renita stood a chance if she encountered those contract killers. I wished I could have backed the whole affair up and somehow left her out of it.

“You need help,” I told her. “Just make certain to keep your weapon concealed. You don’t want to unnecessarily frighten anyone.”

“Yes dear.”

“Check in with me when you’re done.”

“Yes dear.”

“Renita.”

“Yes dear?”

“Quit calling me dear.”

“Alright snookems.”

This morning’s Willamette Times had carried an article by Shawn Calloway. While he had taken a couple of backhanded snipes at people, surrounding Genevieve Windell there was succinct background information on the “surviving board.” It proved to be a helpful introduction. My mystery source had been anemic regarding them. Whether they didn’t have the information or didn’t regard them as important, I couldn’t answer. The revered sentiments expressed by board members in the article regarding Clinton Windell, I dismissed as bull. Between the information in the preliminary police report and The Willamette Times article, I was ready.

All of the board members lived in Southwest Hills. Albert Taylor was an affable white-haired man with graceful movements and a gentle manner. I found it difficult to believe he was capable of being tough enough to be part of an executive team. While he disliked Clinton Windell, I didn’t get the impression he had anything to gain by having him murdered. There was still the question of the gems. When I asked Albert about them, he claimed full knowledge of their existence. When I asked how he knew, Albert told me it was a company purchase. Everyone on the board knew about them. The amount and cargo were itemized in the company’s financial documents. Albert Taylor was scratched from my list of possible suspects. He answered every question honestly and directly. As Destini had said his alibi was solid.

Returning to my car, I noticed a hauntingly familiar sight parked in Albert’s driveway that wasn’t there when I arrived, a sapphire Jaguar. The license plate was different but it was the same year, make, model, and style as the one that had tailed me. I asked Mr. Taylor about the car. His wife appeared at his side. She had just returned from a visit with a friend. Mr. Taylor informed me that all of the Bellingham board members drove the same Jaguar. They were leased company cars. It was Clinton Windell’s

idea. He said Windell thought it would give Bellingham an image of fast track modern luxury that could translate to more business from the nouveau riche. “An exercise in excess if you ask me,” Mr. Taylor went on to say.

While Carlos Mendoza and Ronald Davis clearly hated Clinton Windell for what they regarded as backstabbing undercutting methods that Windell used to keep himself on top they had no proof. I doubted those men would have hired anyone to kill Windell judging by their temperaments. They would have shot Clinton Windell themselves.

Stuart Wu was another matter. He was a smallish man of Chinese descent with clear skin, a high forehead, flat nose, and taut mouth. He had a shimmering black ponytail and his eyes were dark and calm.

“Have you spoken with Andrea yet?” Stuart asked.

“Andrea Bettencourt?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Should I?”

“I think you’ll find a conversation with her interesting,” Stuart said.

“How so?”

“She’s a widow you know.”

“I didn’t,” I said. I did know about Andrea Bettencourt being a widow but pretended not to.

“And she places her reason for being so squarely on the shoulders of Clinton Windell,” Stuart said.

“Really,” I said feigning surprise by the news.

“Clinton would invite Harvey Bettencourt along on our once-a-month skydiving excursions,” Stuart said. “Harvey had a heart condition. Both his doctor and Andrea urged him not to go. If Harvey hedged, Clinton would goad him into it by playing on his ego. ‘I understand if you’re not up to it Harv. Sometimes I have difficulty keeping it together when I’m up there with a strong heart. I can imagine how tough it must be for you.’ It was bad enough Andrea was the more respected of the two by the board but Clinton would tweak Harvey every chance he got. It worked every time.

“Coincidentally, Harvey died two years to the day Clinton was murdered. His parachute didn’t open. Investigators said his primary ripcord didn’t work. Harvey panicked had a stroke and never tried his auxiliary cord.”

“Sounds like an unfortunate series of events,” I said.

“The investigation was closed as a skydiving accident. His parachute would have opened had Harvey pulled his auxiliary cord. He would still be alive. That’s a difficult loss for a mother of three.”

Wu paused to take me in. He was sizing me up to determine if I were swayed enough by his story to regard Andrea Bettencourt as a primary suspect.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

“How did you feel about Clinton Windell?”

“I didn’t *feel* anything. He was my boss. I did my job as I will continue to do now that he’s deceased.”

“Any gripes or unsettled scores?”

Mr. Wu smiled. “Who doesn’t have such demons in their life? But I assure you there was nothing between Clinton Windell and myself that would constitute murder.”

It was clear Stuart Wu was cool, evasive, and shrewd befitting his background as a corporate attorney. Useful skills in the courtroom as well as in business they also fared well for thieves and murderers. His alibi was that he attended The Phantom of the Opera with—ironically—Andrea Bettencourt the same woman he was attempting to serve up. Wu told me Bettencourt was distraught over it being the anniversary of her husband’s death. Wu stayed to comfort her. When Stuart believed, Bettencourt was back to her old self he came home. How much and what kind of comfort Stuart offered I didn’t inquire. Wu was smart enough not to have given me an alibi that wouldn’t pan out. That made it believable.

Renita called on my way to Andrea Bettencourt’s house. She had two Diva employees left to interview. I asked if she had had any problems. She said Judith Hardy had given her full run of the place. There was an anxious pause before Renita asked me, “Wasn’t a sapphire Jaguar following you yesterday?”

“Yes,” I said.

“License plate HADES,” Renita said.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Looking out of the Human Resources Director’s office at the company parking lot,” Renita answered.

“Renita —”

“I wanted to be certain before I tried getting a look at this guy.”

“Stay put I’m on my way,” I said.

“Am I missing something here?” Renita asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Why do I get the feeling you don’t trust me to do this?”

“We’re a team,” I said. “This situation requires teamwork more than any we’ve ever encountered.”

“You mean babysitting,” Renita said. “I’m perfectly capable of handling myself C. J.”

“I’d ask for backup if I were in your position,” I said not meaning it but hoping Renita would buy it.

“Must I remind you I have a black belt in both Tae Kwon Do and Jujitsu?”

*As if a bullet cares*, I thought. “We’ll talk about it when I get there.”

“Sure,” Renita said. I could tell by her tone that Renita was feeling headstrong about going through with her plan.

“Complete your interviews but for God’s sake *do not* confront the driver of that car.”

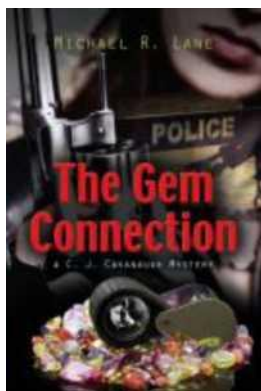
“Wait! Someone’s heading for the Jaguar!” Renita said.

“This man is not working alone,” I said. “You’re going to need backup.”

“I’m going to get a closer look.”

“Renita stay put!” The phone went dead. I drove as fast as I could to Diva.





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