

Pat Ruger: Caribbean Shuffle

Pat Ruger Mystery Series #2

By Jack Huber

Chapter 1

I slowly became aware of a quiet but insistent knock on my front door. Groggy, I looked at the glowing digits on the nightstand alarm clock, which read, "5:11am."

"Great," I said aloud and exited the warm covers with some annoyance. "Just a minute!" I yelled toward the living room and grabbed my robe. Bare feet on cold wood floor wasn't going to be pleasant.

When I reached the door, grumbling under my breath with each step, I peeked out the peephole and saw a Hispanic teenager. I opened the solid wood door to see someone vaguely familiar. "Juan?"

"Yes, Mister Ruger. You remember me?"

"Yeah..." I was still shaking off the cobwebs. "Aren't you Angel's nephew?"

"Yes, we met at Uncle Angel's funeral. You said if I needed help to come see you."

"Come in," I said, standing aside. Juan hesitated but stepped in. I closed the door and followed the diminutive teen into the living room. I'm only five eight but I was a good six inches taller than Juan. The room was dimly lit only from the light coming out of my bedroom's open door. Somewhat unsteadily I switched on a lamp next to the sofa.

Juan stopped and turned back toward me, not sitting down. "I need help."

"What's wrong?"

"It's... I'm... Someone's been beating me up at school, and no one won't do anything about it."

"You don't look beat up..."

"Wait," Juan said as he unbuttoned his shirt. He lifted up his right arm and greenish bruising was very visible, along with some nasty purple contusions. I was awake now. He buttoned back up. "Who's doing this to you?"

There are two boys on the basketball team that just won't leave me alone. I didn't do anything to them, except I refused to join the team."

I sat down and Juan followed suit. "Why are you here at five in the morning?"

"I got a text before I left for school... said they were going to get me today..." He pulled out his phone and brought up the message.

I took it from him and read, "juan gonna gt beat 2day cant wait."

"That's from James, one of the two dudes. I just didn't want to go to school so I jumped on a rat and came here."

"A what?"

"A rat... a bus. 'RTD'... rat..."

"I get it. What about your mom?"

"She doesn't know. I can't tell her."

"And the school?"

"They said to come back when they did it again. I did that three times and they haven't done nothing."

I thought for a minute. Angel, a long-time friend, was shot by the FBI right in front of me. Unbeknownst to me or the feds at the time, he died trying to protect his sister and her kids, of which Juan was one. I couldn't let him down.

"What's James' last name?"

Juan looked anxious and didn't answer.

"It's okay, we'll take care of him," I tried to assure.

"Lovell."

"And the other boy?"

"Leon Jordan, he's a brother."

"You mean he's black?" Juan nodded. "And James is white?" He nodded again. "Go home and tell your mom that you're sick. If she hassles you about it, have her call me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure, but I have an idea. I'll call you tonight. Text me your number." I paused to consider ramifications. "Can you take the bus home or should I drive you?"

"I'll get home okay. Thank you, Mr. Ruger." He reached out to shake my hand.

I took it and shook, and replied, "Call me 'Uncle Pat."

Chapter 2

I pulled into the drive-through at Denver Coffee on the way into the office. PAL Investigations was on the north side of town on the second floor of a 50's-era pedestal-style building. "PAL" stood for "Pat-Anna-Lola" for the three of us who started the company.

I parked beneath the second floor near the base of the building and carried my Columbian blend to the lobby elevator. I could have gone up the back stairs- I sometimes did- but hot coffee and a briefcase dictated a normal entry.

No one was at the front counter and I carried my load back to my office. From the counter the center aisle emptied into four large offices. We never changed the sixty-year-old teakwood paneling or forest green carpeting, but we did bring in new, contemporary furnishings and updated computer equipment after our last big project. I was still getting used to having a large, modern desk and workstation.

Lola wasn't at her desk, but I could hear Anna back in the breakroom and Jacob unpacking boxes into his new digs. Previously a freelance P.I., Jacob was interested in a steady paycheck and we weren't about to turn him away.

I popped my head in. "Hey, Jake. Excited?"

He looked up from his desk drawer. "Please, I prefer 'Jacob.' Yes, sir, I'm very excited."

"Jacob, then. I've got a job for you. Come to my office when you get done here."

"Will do."

I finished the trek to my office and got comfortable. I needed to formulate a plan to handle the thugs on the basketball team. I sat back, thinking, and took a big drink. I loved this Columbian blend.

Anna ambled in. She was a blonde beauty that was a package deal when I first met Lola. They were girls of the street when I began helping them.

In fact, I bought their way out of the business and they repaid me by opening this firm with me. They were women of unusual skills.

"Boss?" Anna closed my office door and turned the latch to lock it. "Can we talk for a few minutes?"

Anna had curves and, yes, I had partaken in the past. She and Lola had helped me through some tough times, but I felt more like a father figure than not, and we hadn't been together in the biblical sense for quite a while.

"Sure, what's up?"

Anna went to the corner of the full-window wall and twisted the control rod on the blinds, closing the louvers. "I'm sorry about Amanda. " She moved to the door and closed those blinds. "She was stupid to leave you here just for a job in New York."

"The F.B.I. needed her there. She really excels in anti-terrorism and that's the hub right now. I get that and I'm happy for her."

"Yeah, I know." Anna closed the last window blinds. "But it sucks for you."

I nodded, not sure what else to say.

"Did Amanda really think you'd pack up and move to New York?" She came over to the desk and I had some idea what she was intending. She sauntered over in front of me and sat on the edge. Kicking off her heels, she threw her legs up on the desk to the right and leaned on her elbow at my left, lying on her side.

"Anna, I don't think this is a good idea."

Anna unbuttoned her blouse and unsnapped her bra, then smiled broadly. "I do. Let me take your mind off things for a while." She began to reach out to grab my shirt but I stopped her.

"Sorry, honey. I don't want to do this." I stood up and started helping her re-button. "It's not a good time."

"Ah, Boss..." she whined. A knock on the door caused a disappointed look to come Anna's face, and she got up off the desk.

"Just a sec!" I called out and let Anna finish gathering herself.

I walked over to the door, unlocked it and let Jacob in, while Anna opened up all the blinds. He was holding a shiny black leather binder. "Good timing, Jacob. I was just going to call you."

"Thank you, sir," he replied and sat in one of my guest chairs. Jacob was husky but well-dressed and clean-shaven. "What can I do for you?"

"It's a long story..." I watched Anna throw me a sly smile as she left. I knew this wasn't over. Back to Jacob, "I need some Internet footage A.S.A.P."

"What footage?" he asked, opening the binder and taking out a pen.

"I need you to find some grainy cell phone footage of two teens beating up a third. The two guys need to be a black guy and a white guy, and one being hit should be Hispanic. It would be great if you couldn't see their faces very well."

"I think I can find that. There's a lot of playground fights on YouTube and Instagram these days."

"I need about two minutes of video. Let me know as soon as you have it."

"You got it, Boss."

Great, I thought. Now he was calling me 'Boss.'

Alone in my office, I sat back and contemplated the last few months. My first real relationship since my wife, Ellie, passed away had recently come to an end.

Amanda and I met while I was investigating a missing person. She was a senior agent with the FBI when my case became involved in a homegrown terrorist threat. We hit it off and we had a lot in common—law enforcement, love of fishing, love of good food and wine, lack of kids.

Amanda wasn't a kid, either, but she was a very attractive, olive-skinned, athletic, professional woman.

I moved into her place a few months later, though I did keep my house in good working order. Good thing, since our professional success together helped her earn a promotion and a move to New York City. She told me about the job while we were trolling for wipers at Eleven Mile, about three hours' drive from home. I didn't need long to think about whether to join her. Me in the Big Apple? That wasn't going to happen.

We knew when we started up that her career was of utmost importance to her and eventually this situation might arrive. I didn't have any regrets, but I did miss her.

Lola interrupted my doldrums. "Hey, Boss!" She was on the speakerphone. "Can you come to my desk?"

Lola is in, I mused. I stood and walked to the reception area, where she was excitedly looking at a website. Lola had very dark hair and an almost perfect hourglass figure. She was short but sassy, and her Spanish accent was almost gone. At my suggestion, Lola had been working with a speech coach, and she was certain she would be seen in a better light if she was accent-free. When I thought about it, I sort of missed her funny-sounding Spanglish. Always stylish, this morning she was wearing designer jeans and a purple, tight-fitting blouse with her usual cleavage.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Come around here and help me fill this in."

I moved around the desk and saw that she was on a dating site, and leaned in. "Denver Professionals Hooking Up" was the large tag-line across the top of the screen. I was confused. "You don't need to find a date online... You just step outside and the guys line up for you."

"That's sweet. It's not for me... You're about five-nine?"

"Five-eight... wait, I'm not going to go online to make a date."

"Don't worry, Anna and I will filter out the losers. We want you to find a respectable, beautiful professional woman to spend time with. Five-eight... two ten?"

"Yeah, that's about right." I stood up. "I don't think I want to do it that way."

She sighed with a little exasperation. "It doesn't matter how you meet her, just as long as you do." She typed for a moment and stopped to read her entry. "How does this sound? 'Mid-fifties but active, I'm looking for a woman who can keep up. I love fishing, camping, hiking, photography and wine."

"Wait, I like beer more than wine."

"That's okay, we can fib a little. A beer-drinking woman is probably going to be my age..." She smiled and looked at me. "Or are you lookin' for that?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I didn't think so, either." She looked back at the screen. "Looking for a fun time with the opportunity for more.' I think that should do it. I added your picture, the one Amanda took of you at the gun show. It makes you look rugged, but cute."

"Couldn't you find one where I'm wearing a hat?" With my reddish-brown hair having gone mostly silver, I didn't feel it was my best feature.

"No, the right girl is goin' to LOVE your hair."

"Let's not do this... I'll be fine."

"You're outvoted," said Anna, who had just stepped in. "Two to one."

I knew enough not to argue when the two of them were teamed up. This was going to happen whether I liked it or not. "I'm leaving on Saturday on my cruise, so don't make any dates for me until after I get back." They both nodded and each seemed to have a twinkle in her eye. "I mean it," I added firmly.

"We could find you a cruise-mate." Lola offered, ignoring my plea. "I'm sure we could."

"No," I stepped away from Lola's desk, trying to look indignant. "I'm not staying with a stranger for a week in a tiny cabin. Besides, I'm looking forward to spending time with Jimmy and Erin."

They looked at each other for a moment and I waited for the verdict.

"You could take one of us..." Lola offered with a sly smile.

I thought of how to turn her down, but no words came to me.

"Okay," Anna finally replied, letting me off the hook. "No cruise-mate."