

# The Cigar



A Cooper Wright Mystery  
by Rob Steele

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I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be more interested in a case just based on its location or not. I mean other than not having to go back to August Acres; that cursed little subdivision has way too many things going on there. Any case is more interesting if it's not there. No, this time the call comes from a Cuban bar called "Cigarros y Whisky - Tango Foxtrot." I know there's a play on words there somewhere. Part of me is looking forward to a place like this – I've never been to a cigar-bar before. If it had been around about five years ago, I might not have stopped smoking.

Of course, there's the murder, too. I mean, why bother calling for Lt. Cooper Wright of the homicide department if there isn't somebody dead somewhere? It's not that I want anyone to be dead, but it is my job and I've always loved puzzles. That's how I have to view this kind of thing. Not so much in the putting the body back together again, that's our coroner Seong-ho Young's department, but solving the puzzle of who killed our victim.

Technically our victim isn't in the bar itself, but face-down in the bar's parking lot. Besides, at seven in the morning, the bar is closed. Doc Young has beaten us to the scene and is already examining the body. And by "us," I mean myself and Detective Manny Vasquez. I brought Manny along because he speaks Spanish and I, well, don't. Never even took it in school. My mom thought French would be better for me. Haven't even spoken that in years either – thanks mom. "So, Doc – what have you got so far?"

"So far?" he asks. "Not much. I just got here. It's not like I'm driving around and getting spiritual pointers on where the next dead person is." I wince a bit at that as he rolls the body over on his back. "I gave his wallet to Scott," he says hoisting a thumb behind him. "Ask him."

That would be Officer Scott Walker who has the wallet open and license ready. "Alfredo Abel. Age 63. Hmm, a green card. Says he's from Cuba. Might explain that box of cigars." I look around and see a remarkable lack of cigar boxes. I fix Scott with a puzzled look and he returns a look that is more... admonished. "I, uh, had CSIs photograph it and sent back to the lab to be processed."

I shake my head and look disapproving. “You know you’re not supposed to move anything until the senior officer arrives and at least looks around, right?” He mumbles an apology and hands me the wallet, which I refuse. “Oh, no Captain Walker. You go right ahead and bag up all the evidence.” Scott’s a good kid but he gets ahead of himself sometimes. He understands my sarcasm and reprimand and looks sufficiently scolded.

“If you want a cigar, Cooper, I think I found one for you.” Doc Young opens Mr. Abel’s mouth revealing what looks like a recently lit and hastily extinguished cigar. He uses forceps to remove the cigar and it looks like the whole thing was lit and then shoved down his throat. “Looks like he asphyxiated on this, and I don’t see how this could have been self-inflicted. My best guess would be this is not suicide and we have a homicide case. I’ll let you know more after the autopsy.”

“Do you think someone killed him thinking they were real Cubans?” Manny asked.

“Could be. But, for now, I don’t care where the cigar came from. I think Cuban cigars are legal at the moment and the amount of money we’d waste on the tests that have to be run to find out where a cigar came from is more than the fine we’d charge the guy who had the cigar in the first place. Where’s the point in that?”

I thank Doc and shoot another punishing look at Officer Walker before Manny and I head to the bar. Officer Walker did one thing right, he called the owner and got him to open the place up. We almost make it into the bar when I take one step back and look at the glowing neon sign over the door. “Cigarros y Whisky - Tango Foxtrot... doesn’t that mean Cigars and What the Fu-“

“Yeah, boss,” replies Manny with a sign. “That’s what it means.” As we enter we see the owner, Gilberto Ibañez, at the bar with, appropriately, a whiskey in hand. He turns to see us as we enter and tips his glass to us before downing the shot. He says something to us in Spanish, to which I shrug and look at Manny. “He says he apologizes but he doesn’t speak English. He hasn’t gotten around to it yet. He’s been so busy with the bar.” I give Manny a nod and head to the bar’s office to give it a once over. I

know Manny can handle the initial interrogation. He's a good cop in his own right.

The office is behind the obligatory wall of liquor behind the bar. Never been in a bar that didn't have that. The deco here is about what I'd expected. It's more generic Hispanic than purely Cuban though. I don't recognize enough of the items to name them (other than they're mostly yellow, like the rest of the décor) but I do recognize part of the sports corner. Pictures of Rafael Palmeiro, Tony Perez and Luis Tiant – three of baseball's best Cuban imports. I nod approval to myself and enter the office to find Darryl Silverstone at the desk of the small room. Only he's not really sitting at the desk, he's swiveled the chair around to work on another computer behind the desk. "What are you doin' here Darryl?"

"Hey boss." He's been hanging out with Manny too much. My name is Cooper. Is that so hard? "Manny called me. He said there'd likely be a surveillance system for me to go over. So, here I am. And here's the system... and there's a problem."

Because it can't be easy, can it? "What's the problem, then?"

"Well, back here there's a broken bottle of," he inhaled deeply, "I think it's tequila. Just a guess but there's a dent in the wall back here with broken glass in it. Looks like someone threw the bottle at Mr. Ibañez, it shattered, and the tequila went right into the surveillance system. This thing is shot. I'll take the hard drives back to the lab and see what I can do but this thing is toast."

Great. So much for that. Nothing else here looks much out of place. I pass Manny, who is still interrogating Mr. Ibañez, and head outside to grab a CSI to examine the office. That doesn't take long as they're swarming the parking lot, and I return to see how Manny's doing. After a few minutes of high-speed musical gibberish, at least that's what it sounds like to me, Manny turns to me and starts to explain when I hold up a hand and tell him to ask about the tequila bottle in the office. Manny looks perplexed but asks (at least I assume that's what he's saying) and gets a rather nervous looking reply.

Manny turns to me again and says, "It's from a waitress dispute. Joaquina

Santiago quit last night after closing. She said she's tired of the abuse from the customers. When Mr. Ibañez said there wasn't much he could do about it, she threw the bottle." I nod. Seems logical but we'll check that out anyway. I make a note to tell the CSI in the office to check against Ms. Santiago's fingerprints, if they're on record. I also pull Manny aside, just out of human range earshot, hopefully, and tell him to fill me in.

"According to Mr. Ibañez," Manny began, "Mr. Abel is a regular here. Every Thursday night, as a promotional thing, there's a pub quiz contest. The winner gets rewarded with a box of cigars. Mr. Abel has won three weeks in a row, much to the *molestia*... sorry... annoyance of several of the other regulars. Abel has a habit of annoying the others by saying he was born and raised in the true Cuba and no one else here can claim that."

"Can anyone else claim that?"

"Mr. Ibañez says he is," Manny replies jerking a pointed thumb at Mr. Ibañez. "Several others, and then there's the second-generation Cuban families who don't take kindly to it. Last night, the two other competitors in the finals were Luis Ola and Melanie Greene. Luis works down the street at the Cuban market. Mr. Ibañez says Staff Sergeant Greene was shipping out this morning for another tour in Afganistan. But he also vouches for both of them. Says they're good people."

"Does he know if the games last night were fixed? And what kind of Cuban trivia can there be? Bay of Pigs, baseball, Castro and Che Guevara. What's left?" I mention Guevara and Ibañez goes nuts. I do understand the word Argentina and am also suitably chastised by Manny for not knowing where Che Guevara is from. "Never mind about the questions. Just ask about fixing the games." Manny does and gets a negative reply. "Also ask about the cigars. Are they really Cuban?" Again, a negative reply.

At that moment, my phone rang. It's Doc Young. "What's up Doc? I know you're not done with the autopsy yet."

"Haven't even gotten back yet," came the somewhat cellphone-muffled reply. "But I do have something interesting. My new coroner's driver says he knows cigars and the one Abel had in his mouth was a fake."

“A fake cigar? Like a murder weapon fake?”

“It’s tobacco, Cooper. If you smoke it, it will kill you... eventually.”

“I mean is the cigar poisoned or something?”

“It was shoved down his throat. Even if it was poisoned, I think the asphyxiation, was what did him in.” I thank Doc and hang up. In the background, I hear another conversation. I look at Manny but he’s standing next to me. It’s Darryl Silverstone talking with Mr. Ibañez. I guess I’m the only one who took French in school. I decide to intervene when I notice Darryl’s big smile.

Darryl looks at me and says some rather magical words. “He’s got an off-site backup.” About half-an-hour later, Darryl has both left and returned with his own laptop which he sets up on the bar. He accesses the bar’s wi-fi and lets Mr. Ibañez type in a password on a website called Carbon-Piranha. Shortly after, we have the video from the parking lot playing.

According to the time stamp, around two-AM, we see Mr. Abel leaving with his box of cigars. There’s an angry woman in a military uniform staring daggers at him, presumably Sgt. Greene, who gets in her car and leaves. That would seem to let her off the hook. No sign of Mr. Ola. As Mr. Abel lights one of his cigars, a woman pushes past him. We can’t see her face but judging from her walk, she’s not happy. It probably doesn’t help that... “Did he just grab her ass?”

“Si,” reply Darryl, Manny and Mr. Ibañez in a bizarre stereo. Whoever she is, she didn’t like that much. She turned and slapped him. Hard. Right in the jaw. Looks like she knocked him out. Abel spun and landed face first on the pavement. So that’s how the cigar got jammed in his throat while lit. That’s one mystery solved. I have Manny ask who the woman is and Mr. Ibañez hangs his head when he says that that was Joaquina Santiago, the waitress who complained about being harassed by the customers.

We get her address from his files. I have a feeling I’m going to be talking for a while with the DA on this one. We watch the recording a few times and it doesn’t even look like she bothered to wait until he hit the ground before stomping off camera. (Mr. Ibañez says she takes the bus and that’s where it

looks like she's headed.)

I can't say there was premeditation in this killing. There might have been an assault, but it was assault by both sides – instigating and a reflexive retaliating. I'm going to see what I can do about making sure charges aren't filed. I'm not sure Mr. Abel deserved to be killed for it, but Ms. Santiago certainly didn't deserve to be treated that way either. I do make one hard decision. Manny gets to do the paperwork on this one. I'm not even sure where the “ñ” key is.