

## 15 The Hangman's Noose

This was a trap and it had been sprung.

In front of Whitte, on Simmons' desk, were two pictures of the crime scene. He had decided to ignore the questioning and focus on the pictures. The first was how they had found her, naked, lying on her back, smeared in blood, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly agape. The second picture was of her back. Someone had turned her over to get this picture and the thought of one of these apes touching her sickened him.

The first picture had revealed a one-inch stab wound just under her left breast. This is where all the blood had come from and the murderer had seemed to take a great amount of enjoyment from indiscriminately smearing blood over her body. There were smatterings over her cheeks and lips, across her nose, and around her eyes. It was also waxed over her stomach and vaginal area. The second picture revealed splotches of sand-caked blood over her back, down her buttocks, and over her hamstrings and calves. On her right buttock cheek was a lip-smack tattoo. While juvenile, he could see the woman he had begun to fall in love with showing people her butt and explaining that she's already had her ass kissed.

"Was she raped?" Whitte asked harshly.

"We don't know," Horse Johnson replied.

"Mr. Johnson," injected Simmons, "I told you."

"I'm a Ranger, detective."

"Not on my island you ain't."

Johnson frowned at the self-important prick and his obvious lack of empathy.

“Are there other pictures, like a close-up of her calves?” Whitte asked.

Johnson said, “Why do you ask?”

Simmons slammed his fist down hard on his desk, causing everyone to jump back in shock. “Enough!” He glared at Johnson and then toward the third man in the room, Special Agent John Bock of the FBI.

Detective Simmons’ office was almost too stereotypical to describe: gray walls with flaking paint and worn photos, posters, maps and such tatters drooping from the walls, all fading into the grayness of the room. The desk was gray as were the four metal folding chairs. Simmons’ brown wood chair offered the only true contrast to the décor.

Special Agent Bock was a station chief for the joint FBI and Royal Bahamian task force for white-collar crimes. Bock leaned against a corner, his balding head resting on the gray wall, hands in his pocket while sweat quietly meandered from under his yellow-stained pits down the flanks of his shirt. He hadn’t bothered trying to find a fresh shirt that morning when he had received the call and, he really hadn’t bothered making sure his black tie looked presentable. This was a murder investigation and it was something that was thrust upon him, leading him into an alien world.

”Mr. Whitte, is there anything that you see in these pictures that might be of any use to the detective?”

Simmons shot a dagger of a glare Bock’s way; despite this being his home turf, he had to suffer the imperialism of American law enforcement. But this didn’t apply to the fucking Ranger. He dared him to speak. He almost willed it from him, but Johnson simply

sat to the left of Whitte, studying him, probing him, looking for something that Simmons truly didn't give a shit about.

Whitte laid his forehead on his hands that were on the gray desk. His body was fighting spasms and he did not want to speak for if he did, his pain and anger and despair would pour from him, betraying him, tearing down his wall of composure. A timid rap on the closed door scratched the silence. It slowly opened and a uniformed policeman stood in the doorway.

“Sorry, Detective. Mista Whitte’s lawyer is here.”

Simmons’ eyes met Whitte’s and held them captive. “You know what I think happened Mr. Whitte? You tried to convince her to drop the lawsuit and when she didn’t you killed her.” Simmons threw a dismissive gesture toward his subordinate. “Take him.”

Whitte stood and crept across the floor and disappeared into a gray hall.

“That man,” Simmons announced, “is a sick bastard.” He threw his pen onto the table and stood, never acknowledging Johnson, and glared at Bock but spoke to the Ranger from the side of his mouth. “I think it’s a good idea for you to head back to Texas. You need to face the shame of losing your detail.” He walked to the door, “I have witnesses to interrogate.” He turned in the opposite direction from Whitte and disappeared down the hall.

Johnson twiddled his thumbs along the desk. “That was bullshit.”

Bock shook his head. “Hey, I’m white collar crimes. All I know is what I’ve seen on TV.”

“Well, you should have known enough to see that those crime photos were all

fucked up.” Johnson stood shaking his head. “And Whitte’s telling the truth. He was consistent during all three interrogations.”

“So he’s innocent?”

Johnson smiled. “I didn’t say that.” Bock’s assignment on behalf of the United States government was incomprehensible to Johnson and he shook his head as he walked from the room and headed back to the resort.

Whitte was led down a dirty hallway with ceiling fans at various spots pushing the hot stale air into random spaces so as to perpetuate the stale stink of crime and those that investigated it. He was nudged into a small, peeling gray room—much like Simmons’ office—with a small table and two folding chairs. The door was pulled shut as Whitte sat down; sweat began to bead on his forehead. Grief was spreading anew; he didn’t recall everything just right but there is no way he did this, was there? Could he have gone off the deep end? He was coming unhinged. He knew it and everyone around him knew it. Maybe the drug she had given him made him too aggressive. Maybe he snapped. Maybe he became an animal, a beast, a butcher. He was in Belize again.

The door opened and a black gentleman, about six feet tall, wearing a dark Armani suit as if it were his natural skin, strolled into the small room. His pinched nose and dour expression suggested the man was humorless and serious. Good. He needed humorless and seriousness.

A young woman followed; she pulled the chair from the table for the man and

allowed him to sit while she stationed herself behind him to his left side. There was a familiarization to this woman; maybe she looked like someone from TV; maybe she had already been in a dream or nightmare. But more likely, he thought, it was his imagination seeking comfort, something familiar in which to take shelter. Still, she was haunting in the way she stood behind the man, unemotional and detached as she glared into Whitte's eyes. Her skin was soft with an olive complexion. Maybe Mediterranean. Her face was angular and shined with a life of its own, something untroubled and self-assured. A slightly downward-curved curt mouth accentuated a pointed chin to make her stunningly exotic. Her black hair sported a bob cut like something from the 1920's. Her movements were as elegant as her navy blue suit that was well tailored and sophisticated. The suit accentuated her tall, lean body and emphasized the natural tone of her radiant skin. She wore no jewelry.

The man perched half-moon glasses on his nose and opened a stuffed manila folder, examining the contents with an air of indifference. He glanced at Whitte over the glasses.

“My name is McIntosh. I will review da facts with ya and then we'll talk.” His heavy, carefree Caribbean accent betrayed the look of stately snobbery.

“Mr. McIntosh, I don't exactly...”

McIntosh held up his hand. “Right now, Mr. Whitte, I talk, ya listen. I don't think ya appreciate the gravity of 'dis situation.”

“Yeah, I do.” Whitte glanced at the young woman who stared at him as if studying him for, what? Truth? Innocence or guilt? “Aren't you going to introduce me?”

“Dis is Miss. Fabre. She will be assisting me in reviewing da facts and help give ya

some options. She is an associate of mine and is very good at what she does.”

“She looks too young to be a lawyer.”

“And, Mr. Whitte, ya look too old to be dallying a girl young enough to be your daughter. But Ms. Fabre is not a lawyer.”

Whitte sat back with the burning sensation of shame enveloping his face.

“You are represented in da States by Smith & Swchieber. I am a lawyer who is on retainer with dis firm and have handled capital cases throughout da Caribbean. Your case will be high profile, if it goes that far, and ya need da best. It will be ya decision whether ya use me or not. But I’ll tell ya da story and ya can decide later.”

Whitte’s stomach tightened and he felt the rush of nausea pushing up from his gut like the last of too many tequila shots at the end of a long night. He swallowed hard and tried to think of anything else besides throwing up all over the expensive suit across from him.

“Ya know da facts, for the most part. Of course in dere eyes, dis is open and shut. Ya had opportunity, ya had motive, and, from what I understand, ya have a reputation for living on the wild side.” He glanced at Whitte who was stone cold silent; his face was trapped between anguish and defiance. “Here are da facts and I want ya to listen to dem,” he said.

“Okay.”

As the lawyer continued, Whitte couldn’t help but feel a bit more comfortable with the man. Maybe it was the exaggerated use of the strong Carib accent that said, *Hey I’m from here; don’t worry; don’t feel alone; I know my shit*. Whitte used the same method in

certain situations, greatly exaggerating his Texas twang to calm a skittish businessman or even, in some instances, to put forth a sense of provincialism in order to disarm a Wall Street elite.

McIntosh reviewed the evidence that the Bahamian police had amassed during the previous five hours. It amounted to very little and beside the night they spent together, very little actually tied him to any crime, let alone murder. McIntosh warned him, though, that there would be more coming, both true and manufactured.

“DNA was recovered and the police do believe dat ya had sex with her.”

“We didn’t have sex,” Whitte maintained.

McIntosh held up his hand. “Are ya sure? What about last night?”

Whitte couldn’t say anything with certainty so he said nothing.

“And so,” the lawyer resumed, “if da DNA matches, day will charge ya with the crime and detain ya at Fox Hill.”

“Fox Hill?”

“Her Royal Majesty’s Prison at Fox Hill. It is not a very pleasant place. Dey will probably put ya in with da general population and more than likely, ya would be tortured and raped, maybe even killed, before your initial hearing. Even if day put ya in solitary, ya will face da death penalty. Dis is not looking good for ya, especially if day find any more evidence other dan circumstantial linking ya. Now, lucky for us, DNA profilin’ takes a little while and maybe we’ll get dis cleared up by den. Also, nothing will definitively happen before a forensic team from Scotland Yard arrives. Since my little nation belongs to da Commonwealth, membership does have its privileges and we can have access ta one of the

world's most elite police agencies.”

Whitte shook his head, clearing the butchered image of Abby from his mind, and then turned to McIntosh, nodding for him to continue.

“Day got da fact that ya met her in a bar at Atlantis. Day got da fact dat yesterday you were seen on Cabbage Beach with her, almost where da body was found. Now, Mr. Whitte, one of the more bizarre depositions was of a man called Harvey who rented da two of ya jet skis. He told da police dat you were her father.”

“That was a joke.”

“Dis not dat funny now.”

Whitte sat back. “Can I smoke in here?”

“Knock ya self out.”

The lawyer looked hard at Whitte. “Did ya visit our beautiful island in the late nineties?”

Whitte was taken aback. He removed himself from the current and thought about the question. “Yes. My parents owned a home along the coast, north of Nassau. They came down in the winter, I came down in the summer.”

“How about in, say, the summer of 1998?”

“What is this about?” Whitte asked.

“Just humor me,” replied McIntosh.

“Probably. Like I said, I came down here pretty regularly when I was younger.”

Whitte was confused. “Why are you asking this?”

“Miss. Fabre did a quick search of our immigration records. It showed dat ya were



here from July ta August of 1998. Dis is da type of stuff dat ya will be asked. I wants ta make sure dere is a logical response ta dese questions.”

McIntosh sat forward, closing the manila folder as Whitte took a long, uninterrupted drag from his cigarette and then flicked the ashes on the floor. “Mr. Whitte, dere is a harsh underbelly in da Bahamas dat not everyone is aware. On occasion, dere are crimes against women, tourists, who have wandered off by demselves. Rapes, mostly but dere have been a couple of murders and some attempted rapes. It’s our own dirty little secret. Now, day happens few and far between.

“Security on the beaches, especially Paradise Island, has been spotty at best. Local men have been known to sit up in da brush at Cabbage Beach where Miss. Spencer was found and wait till da tourists are in da water. Day’ll run down and grab what day can from da tourists who aren’t paying attention and at night, it is not always safe for a woman to be walking alone. Dere is a real strong possibility dat a local may have grabbed Ms. Spencer, wanting to rape her, and she got out of hand and he stabbed her.

“A while ago, two locals came across a man who was wrapping a tourist woman, still alive, in duct tape so day could take her somewhere ta rape her. They chased him away. There were also two murders, one of an American tourist and one of a British tourist. Both women.”

McIntosh paused for a second and shot a glance back at Ms. Fabre.

“CID wanted very badly da charge a white person. Day tried extremely hard da gather evidence on dese crimes so day could accuse one of two white construction workers day know were intimate with one of da women who had been killed. When day couldn’t,

day found a retarded black man ta charge. He was found innocent of one, and guilty of manslaughter on da other. Da one is still unsolved. To dis day, I do not think he was guilty. Da murders where particularly heinous, much like Ms. Spencer's."

"I don't understand what any of this has to do with me."

"Mr. Whitte, we are solely dependent on tourism and any murder of a tourist hurts us. Remember Aruba. People, day gonna want blood. And dey gonna want a foreigner's blood."

Whitte sank back in his chair. There was a growing pain in his heart as he tried to keep an image of an alive Abby—the girl with which there had been the beginnings of love—fresh in his mind but the blood and the shameful nakedness, the pure violation of her kept piercing the veil. There was a noose out there looking for a target to ensnare and Whitte felt it beginning to tighten around his neck. The self-centered person's reaction is always self-preservation. He was beginning to resent Abby, her murder, her allure to him, her pouty lips and magnetic smile and her playful banter and yes, even the feelings of lust he had developed. It was a sickening thought and it led to self-loathing. Maybe the self-loathing was comfortable in the fact that he admitted he had these feelings torturing him. But all the feelings in the world can't change reality and this was going to end badly.

"Tell me about Belize."

Whitte shook his head.

"Ya can tell me now or ya can tell da magistrate when he decides to incarcerate ya."

Whitte closed his eyes; the images and fears and all of the danger to him and his sanity was coming to the surface. The shame was too strong. He couldn't tell the truth.

“I met a woman when I was there on a trip after I had graduated from college.”

“Dis was in da mid eighties?”

There was a specific date but Whitte let that pass. “She went missing.” Whitte took a last drag from his cigarette and let it drop to the floor where he crushed it with his shoe.

“How did you get this information?”

“From ya general counsel.”

“George Crosswell? You’ve spoken to George?”

McIntosh said nothing and turned to Fabre and nodded. She leaned forward, her eyes intense as if she wanted to burn a hole through Whitte’s forehead.

“What was her name, Mr. Whitte?” she asked, her first comments. Her voice was as exotic as her appearance. There was something about this woman that drew him out from behind his façade. He wanted to cry but did not.

“Anais. That was the only name I have. She didn’t give me a last name.”

“Were you intimate with her?”

Whitte nodded his head.

“Do you blame yourself?” Fabre asked.

“Yes,” Whitte replied. That seemed to give the woman satisfaction and she withdrew, resuming her sentinel-like stance behind McIntosh.

“Mr. Whitte,” McIntosh said, breaking the mystical allure of Fabre, “It seems dat every decade you come into the Caribbean and some-ding bad happens to women.”

“What do you mean?”

“Da murders I spoke of, da British and American tourists? One happened in July

and de other in August of 1998.”

The noose snapped and he now knew that he was hanged.

McIntosh sat back in his chair, appraising Whitte with sad eyes. “I dink I got enough from ya for now. I take it ya surrendered ya passport already?”

Whitte nodded.

“Okay, I’m going back to my office and start callin’ in some favors, get some people down in da streets. I need ta launch an investigation for ya. Ms. Fabre is gonna take ya to get a drink. She’s gonna make ya an offer but I’m not gonna talk to ya ‘bout it.”

“What kind of offer?”

McIntosh tucked the file under his arm and clapped his hands together quickly and then opened his hands and cocked his head and smiled. “It’s in ya hands now, Mr. Whitte.”