

16 Illumination

Even her name was exotic: Inara, an Arabic name, she told him, that meant illumination. Her eyes were her most striking feature, deep green, almost blue. These were the eyes of the Caribbean waters, the same waters that now encircled him and were beginning to slowly choke him. He followed Inara Fabre from the central police station, emerging from a side entrance that emptied straight into narrow streets lined with stucco and clapboard buildings painted various pastel colors. She explained to him that this was an entrance that the media didn't know about and then asked him not to say anything until they arrived to where she was taking him.

Whitte continued under her guidance. He was barely walking as he stumbled into the alley, up a set of secluded stairs and onto a second-story patio that overlooked the alley. They sat at a small, plastic backyard-type table with matching chairs. A waiter approached immediately. Whitte ordered a Cuba Libre with 151 rum and two limes. The waiter questioned Inara with his eyes and she nodded approval.

“How old are you, Ms. Fabre?”

“I'm 24 years old, Mr. Whitte. I wouldn't think that age would make a difference to you considering your flirtations with Ms. Spencer.”

“That's already been established.” Whitte lit a cigarette, his hand shaking slightly as he inhaled deeply, commanding calm while everything around him suggested chaos. “Can I ask another personal question?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“What nationality are you?” he asked, eyeing the approaching waiter with apprehension.

“I am a citizen of the world.” Sensing Whitte’s uneasiness, she waited for the waiter to deliver the drink before she proceeded. “This is a safe place for us to speak. My group’s interests own this restaurant.”

Whitte glanced around the patio. The bar sat in a dark corner with ceiling fans clinging to the pergola shading the patio; there was little decoration save a few beer signs and posters of cricket players and team schedules. “This can’t be a big money maker,” he said.

“We don’t own this to make money”

“So, what the hell is going on?”

“Just like Mr. McIntosh, I am going to ask you to remain calm and quiet while I speak.”

Whitte took a long draw from his drink. “I’m going to need another one of these pretty quick.”

Inara signaled the waiter. “Mr. Whitte,” she began.

“Please call me Jack.”

“I will call you Mr. Whitte. This is a relationship that will last only as long as need be but it won’t become a friendship. I am a professional and I will always keep you at arm’s length. What ultimately happens to you is not my concern. I have a job and I am very good at what I do. If you decide to use our services then it will be an expensive proposition

but it will buy you some time, something you don't have a lot of right now."

Whitte looked deep into her mystifying eyes: Nothing, maybe a small amount of contempt? "Okay, Inara. I can call you Inara?"

She nodded.

"Who are you and this group?"

"All in good time, Mr. Whitte. Please listen and do not let your vice interfere with your thought process," she said, motioning to his drained glass, and, as if on cue, the waiter set a new drink on the table and withdrew from earshot.

"Your situation is, at best, bleak and you should be feeling the desperateness of your condition. You are about to join the ranks of the notorious, you're life the subject of tabloid journalism and scandalous gossip where you will be presumed guilty before any evidence is provided to the contrary. And let's not forget that there is a Texas Ranger out there somewhere who will, no doubt, be under order from his boss, the governor, to seek blood for blood.

"I was brought in for one reason and that is to lengthen the time before you have to face your accusers. Mr. McIntosh believes you to be innocent or I would not be here. He will, however, never acknowledge what I am going to offer you nor does he care. Death follows every aspect of your life when you are in the Caribbean and when all of these deaths are linked together, no amount of evidence will save you. Like Mr. McIntosh said, they will want blood to save their tourism industry.

"The lawsuit is motive. The circumstantial evidence surrounding four unrelated murders delivers a modus operandi and your reputation of a highflying cowboy with

established antisocial, self-destructive behavior establishes a personality capable of these horrific deeds.”

She paused to let this become established in Whitte’s mind and just as he was about to respond, she held up her hand. “The association I belong to,” she continued, “is an amalgamation of similar interests that are able to be more effective together than apart. Our businesses range from legitimate financing and investments to marginally legal activities. I am an expeditor. Whatever the group needs I help to make it happen.

“Now, for your situation. If you stay here, you will be arrested. It may be hours; it may be days. You are guilty of murder in their eyes. With you incarcerated, Mr. McIntosh will find it difficult to launch his own investigation and mount an effective defense. If you disappear, the authorities’ attention will be on your capture and not proving your guilt and the media will launch a manhunt. Imagine how that will play out. With attention elsewhere he will be able to move in the shadows to find the true killer and expose him.

“And, so, my proposition is quite simple. We will smuggle you out of The Bahamas to a safe house we have elsewhere in the Caribbean. From there, you will be able to help with your investigation by simply not being here. If you are caught, you face evading arrest. Compared to murder, that will be the least of your concerns.

“Mr. McIntosh will have no knowledge, however, of what we have done. He will assure law enforcement and the media that you fled on your own accord.

“Our fees are high but that is not your concern. You will deposit an amount of money into escrow. Your payment to Mr. McIntosh will represent his retainer, future expenses incurred for the investigation and the funds we will need to remove you from

Nassau and protect you once there. No doubt, once you are formally charged, your own personal funds will be frozen and your company's funds will be regulated so as to allow the businesses to continue operation without offering you financial assistance.”

Whitte considered the hinky account in Venezuela; he'd have to use that one. Settled in his mind he took a quick gulp from his drink and signaled the waiter for another. The waiter again looked at Inara who nodded her approval.

Questions bounced around Whitte's emotionally drained mind. In the mind of a condemned man, logic is twisted. Desperation overrides legitimate concerns and Whitte, ever the astute businessman, knew this. This was a fire of the unknown but he knew if he stayed in the frying pan he would eventually be cooked to death. He needed time of his own to digest his situation and consider this proposal. The questions could be answered later. “So, how much are we talking about, here?” asked Whitte.

“Two million dollars will be wired into the Scotiabank in the next six hours if you agree.”

Whitte sat back and wiped his brow with his hand. “That's a lot of money, Inara, and that's not much time to consider this proposition.”

“Both Mr. McIntosh and my organization are taking great risks to defend you thus justifying the amount. As the news media begins to understand the soap opera that this affair can become, it will become increasingly difficult to remove you.”

“If I agree,” said Whitte, “where will you take me?”

“I cannot disclose that now for fear that the prosecution decides to arrest you before we have removed you from Nassau. We don't want that slipping from your mouth. Mr.

McIntosh seems to believe they will wait for the team from Scotland Yard to arrive sometime before the weekend to allow them to review the evidence.”

“Okay, when do you think you’ll remove me?”

“Certainly before tomorrow at noon. You won’t know until an hour before we feel it safe to do so. You are being followed.” Inara flicked her head toward the street and Whitte leaned over the cinderblock wall and saw a short Bahamian in a tattered shirt and graying white sitting on the curb with a bottle in a bag.

“Him?”

“Yes. In Nassau, it is very easy to blend in,” she smiled.

“So now they know I’m talking with you. Don’t you think they’re going to put two and two together? I’m assuming that everyone knows you’re a smuggler.”

Inara chuckled. “No, Mr. Whitte, we are very good at what we do. And besides, I told you, law enforcement in The Bahamas can be very corrupt.”

Eight hours before, he had still been unconscious, in the headlock of the devil before he was to be damned. Now, Whitte was drunk on the way to oblivion but still functional enough to do what needed to be done. The ice had melted in his glass of scotch as he stood on the balcony of the suite at the British Colonial Hilton that Inara Fabre had booked for him.

Abigail Spencer, his Abby. She had infected him like a drug. Wasn’t heroin immediately addictive with its first use? Had he overdosed? He clinched his jaw as he

slammed down the warm and watered down scotch. He wasn't fearful of his own demise. That seemed to have been settled a while back. He wanted revenge. He wanted to kill the person who killed Abby and something told him that it hadn't been a crime of opportunity perpetrated by some local junkie. Why had the woman who was suing him sought him out, tried to sleep with him, and not tell him who she was? Some sort of sick fantasy on her part?

McIntosh was right; this was too neatly wrapped. In fact, there had been too many convenient incidents over the past month. Inara told him she was involved with a conglomerate. This Al-Fa'sad character too had said he was representing some sort of conglomerate.

He retreated from the balcony and back into the suite, plopped a couple of ice cubes into his empty glass and poured another shot of Famous Grouse, swishing the golden elixir around to blend with the melting ice. He took a strong sip and then sat on the flowered print couch and placed his drink on the glass coffee table before him. He opened his laptop and waited for it to boot and for the Wi-Fi connection to be made.

Inara had some of Whitte's personal effects brought over from Atlantis and he was now fishing through his well-worn oiled canvass knapsack. He emptied a Dennis Lehane book, aftershave, toothbrush and toothpaste, his electric razor, a pair of scissors, and other miscellaneous items and felt inside the bag. He gently pulled a piece of fabric back to reveal a small panel held in place by a Velcro tab. He released it, exposing a leather flap. Inside was ten thousand dollars in cashiers checks, travelers' checks, and cash. There were also two prepaid credit cards, one a Visa and the other an American Express with ten thousand

dollars on each. Now, he felt a little bit more secure. He lit a cigarette, ignoring the smoke as it rose and dispersed by the swirling ceiling fan, and reached for his cell phone.

McIntosh had suggested he had spoken to George Crosswell, which meant he had been found but as he gave it some more thought, Crosswell had been acting rather queer the last few weeks. Was he involved in all of this? He couldn't take the chance so he decided to call Mo Boucher but then he thought better of it and took another drag and sat back on the couch. He couldn't tell anyone. Telling someone, especially Mo, would put them in the position to lie or tell the truth and either choice was an unfair burden. He was flying solo on this one.

The computer beeped and he sat up. Because he was logging in from an unsecured Internet connection, he logged into Mirage first and then into Triage. He transferred two million dollars to the Scotiabank account that Inara had given him. Then he logged into his personal account. He tried to transfer two million from his stock fund directly into the Banco de Mercantil Petróleo account but it said the account was closed. That wasn't the status when he had discovered the account back in Houston but he thought it through: If it were truly a portal to hide funds, of course it would be closed if trying to deposit funds directly. He tried to then transfer it into the account George had set up for him and bingo; the cash followed the same path it had before, into five different banks and settled into the BMP account. He figured that if he had to go it alone, he could either go to Caracaras or St. Lucia and withdraw the money and melt into the vast sea of humanity that was the rest of the world. Inara had said the authorities might freeze his accounts. He doubted anyone would discover the BMP account and even if they did he knew that Hugo Chavez' corrupt

and backward government wouldn't cooperate with U.S. authorities and even if they did, they probably wouldn't know what to do.

At least he hoped so. He logged off. He downed his drink and fixed another.

When Inara had tucked him into this room under her name; she instructed him to remain in there and to not answer the door. An hour before they would move him, she would call with instructions. In the meantime, she told him, get some sleep. He didn't want to dream—not now—and so slammed down the drink he had just made and set about to drinking three more before trying to sleep.

Three girls—wearing pajama bottoms with tee shirts and child's fuzzy slippers—were huddled on a couch with the bride-to-be in the center. Molly, 24, was sobbing though the flanking two girls had managed to quiet her some. The fourth girl, Julie, the oldest at 28, was wearing slacks and a blouse. Her sandy blond hair, in contrast to the other three girls, was cut short, like a young boy's. She sat to Johnson's left in an armchair facing the open balcony, silently sulking.

“Out of curiosity,” said Johnson, “who suggested coming to Nassau for the bachelorette party?”

“Abigail,” Consuela responded, “Well, actually her stepfather. It was kind of last moment. He offered to pay so we decided to come.” Consuela, 22, was the daughter of a wealthy Hispanic banker from El Paso. Johnson, under different circumstances, would be pumping her for information about her father who had suspected ties to one of the drug

lords along the border.

“So, you girls all know each other from law school, right? What about you, Julie?”

“I’m a TA for Constitutional Law,” she spat. Suddenly she turned from her transfixed position. “You didn’t do your job. Right? You were supposed to protect her.”

“No, I didn’t.” That stung Johnson in the heart. “I didn’t protect her and I was supposed to.”

Her anger seemed to subside into despair at his acceptance of responsibility and she withdrew into herself again. The other girls didn’t seem to know how to feel, their ashen faces were colorless and streaked with tears, their hands searching for the proper place to rest.

“Yeah, girls, I fucked up, okay.” He pursed his lips and closed his notebook.

“Okay, no more notes. It’s just y’all and me and we all want to find out who did this and catch the son of a bitch.” None of the girls spoke. “Bridget, how ‘bout you start this off.”

“Well,” Bridget, 24, began, wiping her nose with a tissue, “we landed and got here. We unpacked, you know.”

“We went swimming, dick head,” Julie interjected.

Johnson stifled a chuckle. “Okay, after swimming?”

Molly spoke up, “Well, you know. We all went to the dance club in Nassau.”

“What was the name of the club?”

“Sticky’s.”

“Did anything unusual happen there?”

“No,” responded Consuela. “We danced a little and watched the show.”

“What show?” Johnson asked.

“You know, the male dancers and all,” Molly said.

The thought of it repulsed Johnson. Sweaty women, okay. Sweaty men, not okay.

“So what time did you girls return to Atlantis?”

“Ten-thirty.”

“And then what?”

“Bridget, Consuela, and I went back to my room and watched a movie,” said Molly.

“What about Abigail?”

“Well...” Molly shot a glance to Julie, who was still self-absorbed in her peculiar shade of sorrow. “Abigail said she wanted to go down and play the slot machines for a while.”

“Why didn’t you girls go with her?”

Again, a pause until Bridget spoke up. “Molly’s not used to drinking like we did.” she said grimacing at the bride-to-be, “She was puking pretty good.”

Typical college kids. “Julie?” She ignored him. “Julie, what about you?”

“I have diabetes. I wasn’t feeling too good, either. I stayed in my room,” she mumbled.

Johnson nodded and pulled his lips tight and then turned his attention back to the girls. “Okay, what about yesterday morning? What did you girls do?”

“We all met downstairs for breakfast and then we went shopping,” Bridget said.

“What time was that?”

“Breakfast or shopping?” Molly asked.

“Both.”

“Well, we met around nine and ate the breakfast buffet and then we walked over to the shops behind the hotel. We finished around ten-thirty and came back here. We played a few slot machines, had lunch and then caught a cab into Nassau to go to the Straw Market. That was around noon.” Molly said. “Abigail stayed behind. She said she wanted to work on her tan.”

“What about Julie?” he asked, turning to her.

“She went with us. Abigail really isn’t a big shopper,” Molly explained.

“Okay, when did you see Abigail again?”

“Five-thirty. She was really sunburned and not feeling too good,” Consuela answered. “We all went up and took naps and met back downstairs at seven-thirty.”

“What about you, Julie?” Johnson asked.

“What about me what?” She never removed her eyes from the distant gaze into oblivion. “Screw you.”

“She didn’t meet us for diner,” announced Molly.

“Who, Abigail?” Johnson asked.

“Well, her too.”

“So, Abigail wasn’t at diner either?”

The three girls shook their head in unison. “We went clubbing again, you know, in Nassau.”

“Julie, too?”

“No. She doesn’t like clubbing ‘cause she’s married and all.”

Johnson leaned back into his chair, “She’s married?” speaking as if she were no longer in the room, which, for all intents and purposes, she wasn’t.

“Yeah, to one of our professors.”

“So, obviously, Abigail wasn’t with you guys.”

“That’s right,” Julie spat out.

Johnson narrowed his eyes at Julie. “Was she with you?”

There was no response. So far, however, the times Abigail was unaccounted for were consistent with when she was identified as being with Whitte.

“So, did any of you see Abigail again?”

Again, no response. Molly began rocking back and forth and Bridget leaned forward and pulled her closer. “It’s going to be okay,” she whispered into the bride’s ear.

“So, what time did you girls return?”

“About midnight, I think,” Consuela sobbed.

“None of you checked in on Abigail?” Johnson asked incredulously. He was quickly becoming irritated. Sure they deserved to be scared. There hadn’t been enough time to feel true sorrow and right now, they were all self-absorbed in their own version of hell. He heard a muffled gulp come from Julie; her stoicism was beginning to crack.

“What about you, Julie? Where the hell were you?” Julie began rocking. “Come on, girl. Tell me what you know.”

“Ranger Johnson, please go easy on her,” Molly said. “She doesn’t want this getting out.”

“Why? Your friend is murdered and you don’t want any of this getting out? Sorry

girls, too late. I need to know what the hell I'm dealing with." Johnson shook his head and took a deep breath.

Then, fate intervened with a hard rap on the suite's door. Johnson knew who it was. Damned good timing. "Julie, honey," he began in a soft, soothing voice. "Can you go get that for me?"

She didn't move and Johnson clapped his hands together, "Julie, please."

She stood—pale, with sagging muscles in her face—and moved forward like a zombie; her arms were crossed close beneath her breasts as she disappeared from the spacious bedroom and through the living area and toward the door. Molly, sniffing, stopped rocking and took the initiative.

"Ranger Johnson, she's nervous that she's going to be found out."

"About what?"

"Ranger Johnson, Abigail couldn't have been with this guy," Consuela said.

"If Julie doesn't tell him, I will," Bridget interjected testily.

"What are you girls talking about?" Johnson said, leaning forward in his chair.

Molly sat up rigidly and held her face tight, her eyes betraying a fear of some nature that Johnson couldn't understand.

"Abigail was my lover, Mr. Johnson," Julie whispered as she stumbled by him, dropping a DVD in a clear plastic sleeve into his lap. She returned to her seat and pulled her feet onto the cushion and held her legs tight against her chest. "The only time that Abigail wasn't with me was when we went shopping in town, yesterday, and last night after two-thirty." Her chin was quivering. "This can't get out. My husband will dump me."

“That is not going to happen, honey,” Johnson spoke softly, “It’s like in Vegas: it stays in here.”

Julie began sobbing but there was a clarity poking through the tears as she held her arms tight around her knees. “I loved Abigail. She was something really special, you know?”

Johnson held his face grim, nodding for her to continue.

“She got a call last night around eight. She said it was her stepfather and he wanted her to meet someone who was coming in late. I don’t know who it was.”

“Didn’t it seem kind of strange to you?”

“Not really. The governor was always asking her for favors and such. That’s why she hated him so much. After her mom died, he acted like nothing had happened and it was Abigail’s obligation to fill in for her. And in more ways than one.” She let that implication settle over the room. “She acted out. She started doing drugs and when we met at school, I helped her stop doing that stuff.”

Johnson’s face betrayed his shock. “Did you girls tell the Bahamian police this?”

Molly frowned. “They never asked us any questions.”

Johnson shook his head. Idiots. “So what happened last night?”

“She got a call around two-fifteen in the morning. She said she’d be right back but it was the last time I saw her. I fell asleep. I should have waited up for her. I should have gone down with her.” Then she lost it and Bridget jumped to her feet and sat on the arm of Julie’s chair and held her tight. Julie reached up and grabbed Bridget and pulled her closer, rocking, blubbering, screaming out for it to all go away.

