

22 Black Angel

Jack Whitte awoke suddenly. He tried to sit up but his head spun and unconsciousness was pulling him back. He kept his eyes closed lest he might throw up.

“Be careful, Mr. Whitte,” lilted a woman from somewhere beyond his field of reality.

Despite feeling bodily aches, he assumed that he might still be in a dream and so he asked, with the confusion that was his mind, “Are you an angel?”

The woman laughed, “Have you ever seen a black angel before? Least not on TV. They all be white.”

Whitte took the word black to mean dark and in Whitte’s truncated mind, dark meant evil so he contemplated hell; this was fleeting. He opened his eyes and the same shadowy figure he had the last time he had regained consciousness hovered inside the glaring light coming from a window. She was, as self-described, a black female and extremely attractive and dressed as before—navy blouse with white shorts. “If you can die you can be an angel” he croaked. “I don’t think God discriminates.”

She chortled. “Perhaps so.” He tried to sit up once more but gravity won. “I don’t want a repeat of yesterday. Slow down, Mr. Whitte.”

Yesterday? “How long have I been out?” he groaned.

“Since you came here. Two days ago.”

Two days?

“I know you’re going to have a lot of questions. Some I can answer and others I cannot.”

She walked toward him with a syringe and a cotton swab. He jerked back.

“Don’t worry, this is a vitamin B cocktail. It will help with your energy. You’ve been slowly coming back to us and I don’t want you turning for the worse again.”

Whitte gave way as she injected the potion into his right hip.

“You had a nasty reaction to the anesthetic you were given.”

“Anesthetic?” He squinted. “Who are you?”

“My name is Gabriel but you can call me Gabby. Everyone else does.”

Whitte’s left hand felt sore. It was bruised and a small bandage lay on the top.

Gabby said, “It was where we had an IV in you. You were terribly dehydrated.”

“You said something about stitches,” he paused weakly, “yesterday?”

“Yes. You had a fall. They said in a laundry room. When you passed out you fell against a metal table. At least that’s what they told me. It was on your left hip. Do you feel it?”

“No,” he lied. “I’m hungry.”

“I suspect so. You’ve only been fed nutrients through the tube. We removed it this morning. I can get you something to eat but it must be light.”

“I want something greasy,” he announced groggily.

“Again, I suspect so,” she laughed.

Whitte now realized that he wasn’t in a dream and this was a live person administering to him. She was quite lovely with soft cocoa eyes and skin and short dark

hair. Her smile was warm and pleasing, as was her gentle Caribbean lilt. He struggled, once again, to sit up. She helped him this time, fluffing the pillows behind his head as she guided his head back down.

“Gabby, where am I?”

“Well, now, that is one of the questions someone will answer after you have eaten.”

It didn't satisfy his building apprehension but he was beginning to recall why he found himself in such a setting. He remembered the mysterious Inara and his escape, the vanilla malt and hamburger, the room attendant who was really working for Inara and the large man who had swirled into his unconsciousness. He didn't remember falling down then but he didn't remember anything after the laundry room except for his first attempt to regain lasting consciousness the prior day.

“I threw up on you, didn't I?”

“No, Mr. Whitte, only on yourself but I did have to clean you up.”

“Sorry,” he sheepishly said.

“No bother,” she replied with a wink. “I got to see what a fit man you are.”

Whitte examined the room. Just as he had remembered from his first waking, it had dark, mahogany planks as walls, with a thatched roof and an open window that brought in the sea breeze. There was a slight hint of pine in the air but he couldn't discern whether it was from the thatching or disinfectant. To his right was a closet and to the left, he assumed, was a bathroom. “I'd like to shower.”

“No problem. Do you have any anxieties about me seeing you naked?” she smiled,

“I already have, obviously, but you did not know this at the time.”

Whitte lifted his sheet. Yes, he was naked. He felt violated.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Whitte. I am not ashamed if you aren’t. It’s our natural state, don’t you know.”

Whitte nodded and she helped him to his feet and guided him to the bathroom. “Can you stand okay?”

He nodded.

“Good, I’ll let you be. You have clothes in the closet here,” she said opening the slat door, “and your toiletries are on the bathroom sink. I will take the liberty of ordering you a meal. It is early afternoon. Do you feel like breakfast or lunch?”

“Lunch. Like I said, greasy,” he croaked.

She smiled. “Very well. Something greasy. Maybe I’ll ignore the doctor’s instructions just for you.” She turned and opened a door that spilled onto a porch. A fresh sea breeze floated into the room. “I’ll be just outside. There is a bell by the sink. Ring it if you have any difficulty.”

Whitte took his time. He brushed his teeth—his mouth feeling like a theater’s floor—but didn’t feel like shaving. He examined the small cut that was nestled inside the iliac crest of his pelvis. It was a little over an inch and had two sutures puckering a clean cut. It looked more like a surgical incision to him but he figured it must have been more of a puncture type wound. It was now painful to touch so he was ginger as he washed the area. After he showered, he pulled on a pair of shorts and sports shirt from the closet. He spotted his knapsack and pulled it open and felt around for the hidden stash of money and prepaid credit cards. Yes, everything was in place. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Though it was past noon, it was still morning to the squinting Jack Whitte; squinting because he was emerging from the darkness in which he had been the past few days. But it was also bright; the sun was high above with no clouds to offer shade and the turquoise water reflected the modest heat straight onto his face and so he began sweating almost immediately; sweating not because of the heat but to release whatever administered toxins that, no doubt, still lingered in his system. Gabby waited for him to appear, made sure he was steady and dismissed herself to retrieve his lunch.

Before him was a crescent-shaped bay, one hundred yards or so from point to point, bordered by bleached white sand and sheltered below a steep mountain covered in abundant tropical jungle. Built into the side of the mountain was a three-story structure that would have done Frank Lloyd Wright proud with lots of glass, straight lines, and natural stone façade. This was where Gabby was now hiking toward.

The waters were calm and peaceful but like a playground bully, something was definitely blocking the tranquility: A black twin-hulled 150-foot Bentley Silhouette with the name of *La Araña* painted on its stern with *Monaco* beneath. It guarded the open bay like a warship.

Whitte was housed in a small clapboard cabana that was built upon a pier with a porch at the end that jutted fifteen feet into the bay. The porch faced the bay and had a table and chairs shaded by an awning covered in palm fronds. It was the only shade available and so he pulled out a chair and sat. There was a carafe of coffee with accompanying cup, a pitcher of fruit juice, which, after he had tried it was a strange mixture that tasted like God's nectar. There was also a bottle of rum next to a pair of sunglasses and a pack of his brand

of cigarettes with a lighter. He hadn't smoked in at least two days—if he were to believe Gabby—and so for a moment he considered tossing them into the sea and being done with them once and for all but the pull was like a best friend asking him to come out to play so he greedily lit one, allowing the poisonous smoke to snake its way into his lungs, bringing with it instant comfort. He poured himself a cup of coffee and a glass of juice and downed the juice and sipped on the coffee and smoked another cigarette as life began to return once more.

The human brain is not too different from the central processing unit of a computer; it performs tasks based on user input and it has sub-routines built in that tell the lungs to breathe and the heart to pump, etcetera. Partitions on the hard drive act like the compartmentalization of information, knowledge, and emotion. Jack Whitte was very good at compartmentalization. His make-up was complex—well at least he believed that. To survive, he had to be good at compartmentalization to keep the demons at bay. Sometimes the darkness was so overwhelming that it would crash through the barriers and that was when he sought shelter with a beautiful woman and high quantities of liquor. That helped to return the fear to its proper place in his partitioned mind but he didn't have a woman around.

He glanced over to the rum. It would taste good in the fruit juice. It would taste real good.

He reached for the bottle and twisted off the cap. He held his nose to it and the vapors struck him like a good kick in the butt. As he held the bottle steady over a freshly poured glass of juice, he hesitated. He felt the blood push into his temples and pound

against his brain. His throat tightened. He felt like he was suffocating and this drink would be his oxygen.

Goddamnit!

He replaced the cap and pushed the bottle away.

Abigail Spencer had been brutally murdered. If such a tragedy were pushed into some vacant storage slot in the mind his guilt might become fatal. Someone analyzing him might see any casual dismissal as proof that he was a sociopath and certainly capable of that brutal murder. He could not let this be compartmentalized.

That brutal murder.

Sociopath.

He probed his mind. It was painful, almost too much so. He considered his isolated childhood, being an only child in a strained home; the friendship of Mo Boucher and how that had faded after Belize and returned once Mo had settled in Austin after his stint in the Navy. He had gone back to school after the “accident,” what his father had termed it, and earned enough degrees to teach college kids who were going through the motions as he had. He reflected about his philandering, all the women he had slept with—no, used—to ease his pain (at least he wasn’t perverted enough to sleep with students). He flinched several times as the women paraded through his unhitched mind. Then he brought all of that forward: He had never physically abused any woman; at least he didn’t think so. There were the blackouts; the missing time after he had had that last drink that sent him over the edge, spilling him into the dark abyss. He had woken alone many of those times and had, mostly, never again seen the women he had been with.

He shook his head. No. He couldn't be that cold blooded.

My God.

Quiet tears dripped into his eyes. He wiped them away.

Could the drug that Abby had given him send him over the edge? He thought back to other times he had tried drugs. The results had never been pretty. In fact, pretty damned sloppy. It was why alcohol had been his choice for escape.

Escape.

It started in Belize. The girl, Anais, the girl for which he had felt love; the girl that tempted him into falling into the abyss the very first time. He had escaped Belize. He had escaped with his tail between his legs because he hadn't been able to save her. The beating he took. To this day he remembered the large Arabian man who had kept him in that room for three days, beating him. And worse. Much worse.

Azra'il. Angel of Death.

The shame.

He had been helpless. He had been reduced to something less than a man. Some helpless fool sent on a fool's errand for the rest of his life, counting out time before it all would come to a whimpering end.

And now he was mourning a girl. Another girl. Just like Anais.

Anger welled up in him like a swollen river behind a failing damn. He wanted to find the Angel of Death. He was to be the Black Angel.

As Whitte sat feeling sorry for himself, activity in the bay had picked up. Two yachts, rivaling the twin-hulled Bentley, carefully glided into the bay and weighed anchor. Small skiffs motored up to the yachts and ferried passengers to shore to a dock that led to the main building. Then the skiffs would return, ferrying more passengers and luggage. Just as Whitte's interest in the operation piqued, he heard a distant roar of an airplane. He shielded his eyes and watched as a PBY Catalina—black with a New York cab yellow underbelly—banked toward the island and cautiously executed a landing about fifty yards offshore. Once down, it increased power and drifted into the bay. On the other side of the bay from Whitte bobbed an anchored dock and the pilot skillfully navigated the waters until it glided to a stop parallel to it. A dockhand tossed a rope toward a side door of the plane and it was pulled in and tied off. More skiffs arrived and passengers deplaned, making their way via skiff to shore.

The door opened behind him and Gabby emerged from his cabana with a tray. Whitte didn't want to see anyone; he wanted to send her away and go crawl back in bed but he couldn't do that so like a light switch, he turned off his thoughts and smiled at the approaching attendant.

“I'm starved, Gabby. Where've you been?”

“I didn't take *that* long, Mr. Whitte,” she said with a smile.

Whitte pulled himself back from the table so she could set his tray down and uncover the plate. It was a greasy cheeseburger and fries. The last cheeseburger had slipped him into a comma. What would this one do?

“What, no vanilla malt?”

“Let me order it for you.”

“No, that’s okay. Why don’t you sit and join me while I eat.”

“I can’t do that Mr. Whitte. I’m not supposed to be that casual with our guests.”

“Sure you can,” he said pushing out a chair with his foot. “And call me Jack.”

She glanced down the beach, toward the main facility and then shook her head.

“Tempting but there are others I should be attending to.”

Whitte splattered some ketchup on his plate and dipped a fry into it and pushed it into his mouth. Heaven.

“Don’t eat too quickly. I don’t want to have to clean up your vomit again.”

The thought of vomit turned his stomach but not enough to stop eating.

“Where am I Gabby?” Whitte asked, biting into a French fry.

“Genesis Cay. It is a privately owned island.”

“And where is Inara?”

“Ms. Fabre is not here.”

No elaboration? Gabby was certainly not living up to her name.

“Oh, before I leave,” she added, “Harold brought you your evening clothes.

They’re in the closet.”

“Who is Harold?”

“Your steward.”

“My steward? I thought you were in charge of me.”

She giggled. “No one is in *charge* of you, Mr. Whitte.”

“So, then, where am I going tonight?”

“Your host, Señor Cordero, would like for you to attend the opening night banquet.”

Whitte stopped eating and glanced at the Bentley Silhouette that dominated the bay.
La Araña.

It had been a cover piece in Travel+Leisure or perhaps one of those in-flight magazines that he would mindlessly page through while waiting for the stewardess—oh, wait, flight attendant—to bring him his T&T. It was about a retired head of one of the larger financial houses in Europe—which one?—who now sailed around in his large yacht, experiencing life as it was meant to be—or rather meant to be if you happened to have a couple hundred million sitting in the bank. Salvador Cordero. Yeah, that had been the guy. From what he remembered, he was about ten years older than he was and a lifestyle to which he could aspire. As Gabby continued to fill him in on that evening’s affairs, Whitte drifted. He began to add up all of his holdings. What if he sold everything? Yeah, he should have just enough. Maybe not as big as the thirty million dollar ship sitting in front of him, stubbornly refusing to budge as the other craft around it bobbed on the small waves. Say, twenty million and a couple of million a year to operate and maintain. Yes, he could do it.

He glanced up at frowning Gabby who had realized Whitte’s attention had waned. He smiled, wiped his mouth with the napkin and lit a cigarette. “Tell me, what’s the opening night for? Is there some kind of conference going on here?” He motioned to the activity in the bay.

“It’s *nask*,” she pronounced.

“Nask?”

“N-A-S-C,” she spelled out. “It stands for North Atlantic Steering Committee.”

“A steering committee for what?”

“Ah, Mr. Inquisition, that I do not know.”

“Well, maybe here’s one you can answer: Am I free to leave my room?”

“Of course. You are extended every amenity that we have to offer however, Jasmine is going to be here in twenty minutes to give you a rub down first.”

“A massage?”

“Yes, doctor’s orders. We need to get your blood circulating”

“What doctor?”

“There you go again, Mr. Inquisition.”

Jack Whitte did not like being touched by strangers. He approached the masseuse table with trepidation, being instructed to lie on his back. The masculine Jasmine began at his feet and worked her way up to his shoulders. Whitte grunted and groan with each powerful contact. He was flipped over and she worked her way back down, beginning at the neck and ending with his toes. Jasmine was not satisfied with the results of his lower back and when she proposed applying BENGAY he quipped, “*Been straight* has worked better for me in the past.”

Nothing. It should have at least elicited a snicker. It didn’t matter. What Whitte realized was that he had successfully metamorphosed the darkness into light. His fears had

been forced into a compartment and he was ready to rejoin the world. However, his body was feeling emaciated—despite the recent cheeseburger.

As he began to turn onto his back, Jasmine held him still and he felt a prick on his right butt cheek.

“Vitamin B cocktail,” she informed him.

“I already had one of those,” he said grimacing.

“That should help you with your planned hike.”

“Planned hike?”

“Yes. Get dressed, you’ll find hiking shorts and shoes in your closet. One of our guests has agreed to let you accompany her to the other side of the island. The doctor said it would do you some good.” She offered a curt smile and turned and left.

Despite what Gabby told him about not being controlled, he certainly felt like a puppet.