

## 29 Casino Royale

The smoke from his cigarette wafted upward and clung to the low-lying subdued lighting that hung over the rich, mahogany bar. The casino sat behind him, stationed on the third floor of the private Genesis Cay resort. A soft Bossa Nova floated from an unseen speaker system, lending a subdued, sophisticated atmosphere to the twenty or so patrons who gambled for sport and not wealth, concentration echoing their seriousness.

The casino was understated and in stark contrast to what one would find in any other gambling hall in the world. The tables were stylish but modest and even the clanging from three banks of slot machines was muted so as not to disturb the gamblers absorption.

Beyond the machines and tables were floor to ceiling windows that framed the splendor of the small bay; the sun was retreating behind a cloud on the far horizon, sending forth rays beneath and above, reminiscent of the Japanese Rising Sun. But Whitte was ignoring this scene. He concentrated on his drink, his cigarette, and the inescapable and impending darkness. Yes, he was stuck and he knew it.

Before coming into the casino and winning a large sum of money, he had stopped in what he was told was the media room. Along the walls in magazine racks had been the current edition of most any magazine and newspaper one could want. There were eight high-definition televisions tuned to various world news outlets and he had seen his picture on four of the screens in the short time he stood there, as well as the pictures of Abigail Spencer and Ryan Richardson. They showed the same picture of Abigail. She appeared

much younger than she had in Nassau. It must have been a high school picture. Anyone seeing this picture and knowing a guy on the wrong side of forty had been banging her would be revolted. Hell, he would have been and somehow he was being blamed for the governor's suicide as well as of the murder of his stepdaughter. While the sounds were turned down and he did not want to listen, it was quite obvious that he was being tried and convicted by the world media.

He took little comfort in the fact that he had managed to change his appearance. He wondered whether he was safer in the snake den or out in the streets. Pick your poison.

“So, Señor,” interjected Gustavo—*call me Gus*—the bartender, “you were lucky in cards tonight?”

Whitte shook off his blues and nodded at Gus. “Yep, a little too lucky.”

“There is no such thing as too lucky.”

Whitte took a long drag from his cigarette before stabbing it out. “When you win ten hands in a row in Black Jack and hit the jackpot on the third spin of a slot machine, I would say that was too lucky.”

“Like I said, Señor, there is no such thing as too lucky.”

Whitte signaled for another T&T. “So, Gus. Where are you from?”

“Manzanillo.”

Before Whitte could ask where Manzanillo was, a soft peck on the edge of his neck sent shivers down his spine and then he was encapsulated by a set of arms around his neck and he could feel the warm body of Britannia cozy up to him.

“It's time to eat. I'm simply famished.”

Whitte turned in his seat. Brita was ravishing. Her deep amber tan was emphasized by a white dress that dipped low between her breasts and hugged her tightly in all the right places. He was worried now. How could he resist her?

“Come with me. It’s time for you to meet Salvador.”

As she led him through the casino and into a side dining room he thought about where Gus had said he was from. The only land he had seen was east of the island but if they were offshore Mexico on the Caribbean side, he could think of nowhere that an island would be east of them without there being land to the west of the island. Were they now on the Pacific side? Of course, it could be a small island off one of the Hispanic islands, such as Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic.

As he approached a table that sat behind the glass overlooking the darkening bay, a squat Romanesque man stood and walked around the table to greet him. His hand was powerful as he gripped Whitte’s hand tight. His nails were immaculately manicured with a slim crescent of white marking the end of his fingers. Whitte was a student of nailology, a science that, as far as he knew, was invented by him. A person’s nails told a story of a person’s psychology. Brita, while projecting a cool and controlled persona, had nails that were haphazard: a few looked as if they had been bitten off while others neatly trimmed. The cuticles around her nails were uneven. It told Whitte that she was not as controlled as she portrayed.

It was obvious that Cordero believed he controlled everything he touched. He was the Patron Saint of hand models.

They exchanged pleasantries, Cordero communicating a *mi casa es su casa* kind of

thing to Whitte so he could relax despite the dire circumstances in which he found himself. Whitte thanked him as they sat at the table, Cordero across from him, his hawk-like eyes scouring the table to make sure everything was in its place. As small talk reigned, they were served some sort of spinach pastry with a mild cream sauce artfully dribbled over it, then lobster bisque and finally some sort of game fowl with another rich cream sauce. Whitte didn't speak much, allowing Cordero to tell the story of his life in ambiguous terms all the while, his penetrating eyes wandering over the lusty body of Britannia Morgan. Brita hid her anxiety as best she could but Whitte's impression was that Cordero was a sexual bully and considered it sport to conquer women.

After the entre plates were removed, Brita excused herself to do the ritualistic powdering of the nose. As she left, Cordero couldn't be more obvious as his gaze followed the rhythmic pounding of her rear end. Whitte smirked, *what a bastard*.

"So, Jack, I understand you were quite lucky in your gaming pursuits tonight."

Whitte thinly pursed his lips. "As I told Gus there, a little too lucky."

Cordero nodded. "What, not enough challenge?"

Whitte nodded. "So, Cordero, where are we?"

"Ah, I'm afraid I cannot expose that tidbit of information. Speaking of which, how is your wound?"

Whitte still felt the slight sting in his lower abdomen. "Healing."

"I do apologize for that. It was necessary, however, for us to bring you here under total secrecy. First, I did not want anyone knowing where you had vanished to and I also wanted to make sure you did not know where you were going. We can't be too careful

about protecting our privacy.”

“I suppose I can understand that.” Whitte dabbed at a corner of his mouth with his napkin and then sipped at the remaining wine left from dinner. “How about Inara? Where’s she?”

“Ah, Ms. Fabre, a wonderful creature. I’m afraid she stayed in Nassau to assist in the investigation but I am told she should be coming here soon. Hopefully with some good news. A dreadful circumstance in which you find yourself. I’m only too happy I can help.”

“You also made a pretty good chunk of change in providing me safe harbor.”

Cordero smiled as he removed a cigar from the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

“Believe me, that *chunk of change*, as you say, is just that, change. I would have done this for nothing but I find people are motivated when they have to pay their own way. I understand I share that sentiment with you?” He clipped the end and lit it, savoring the first wisps of his Cohiba Espléndidos.

“Yes, I believe a man values what is earned more than given,” Whitte replied as he lit a cigarette.

Cordero glanced over and spied Brita making her way toward them. “Ah, another lovely creature.” Then he leaned forward and asked conspiratorially, “Do you believe she is wearing panties?”

Whitte, taken aback replied, “Does it matter?”

“Ah, but it does. It reveals a tremendous amount about a woman. If she is then she isn’t searching; she’s quite comfortable in who she is. If she isn’t, well then, maybe she wants something she doesn’t have, so much so that she is willing to open up to just about

anyone who would be willing to give it to her. I believe she is looking for something.”

Whitte narrowed his eyes. “It might mean that she’s hot and needs a little air conditioning.”

Cordero chuckled. “I enjoy your sense of humor.”

His initial assessment of Cordero was correct: a sexual bully.

“I’ll bet you a thousand dollars,” the Spaniard announced.

“What, that she’s not wearing panties?” Whitte wanted to add, *grow up you sleazy bastard.*

As Brita neared, Whitte got up and helped her in her chair.

“Britannia, be a dear, we have a wager,” said Cordero.

Her face flushed as she lowered her eyes and avoided Whitte. She shifted in her seat, turned toward Jack and began to spread her legs. Whitte held up his right hand, never taking his eyes off Cordero, and with his left, retrieved a casino chip from the left pocket of his suit jacket and tossed it toward Cordero, landing it an inch from his resting hand. It was a ten thousand dollar chip. A wisp of smoke enveloped Cordero’s face and then peeled away, exposing a sly smile. He left the chip where it had landed.

“Nicely played,” he said. “So, tell me Jack, do you play chess?” But before Cordero could continue, a slight, pasty white man, maybe in his late twenties, early thirties with black foppish hair approached Cordero on his right side. The man’s hair had an annoying habit of falling down over his right eye. Cordero glanced up. “Yes Daniel?” The man leaned forward and whispered into Cordero’s ear. Whitte glanced at the man’s fingernails and winced. His nails had been bitten down to expose the small flap of skin that protrudes

from the nail bed. Several had been torn back at the edges exposing what looked like raw meat. He could picture the guy tearing away at his nails—a form of self-mutilation—and making rash decisions based on wildly swinging emotions.

Cordero frowned and stood up, neatly placing his napkin on the table. “Please excuse the interruption. I will leave you in the company of the beautiful Ms. Morgan momentarily.” He retreated with the man to the back of the restaurant.

“The guy’s a pig,” Jack exclaimed.

“He’s not that bad once you get to know him. He was just testing you.”

Whitte turned toward Brita. “What’s his story?”

Brita shrugged. “Nothing really. He’s helped me tremendously over the years.”

“He’s demeaning toward you.”

“That’s just his way.”

Whitte shook his head and then motioned toward Cordero and the pasty man. “So, who’s the overly white guy?”

“His name is Daniel Wentworth, one of Salvador’s underlings. He, on the other hand, is kind of creepy.”

“It’s Brighton” Wentworth explained for his intrusion. “He’s having a lover’s tiff with his personal secretary.”

“I need Sir Johnny’s full concentration.” Cordero frowned. “When is his wife scheduled to arrive?”

“In two days.”

“Good heavens. Why that long?”

Wentworth rolled his eyes. “It’s the best Brighton could arrange.”

Cordero shook his head. “That means I’ll have to keep Whitte entertained.” He cast his eye back to the table and to the beautiful movie star. He thought about how he had plucked her off the ash heap of despair, not once, mind you, but upon the handful of relapses, many times. He sighed.

“So what would you like me to do about Brighton?”

He puffed at his cigar. “Maybe it’s time for his little boy Ian to disappear.”

“Do you care how?” Wentworth sniggered.

“No. But don’t do anything that will alarm Johnny. Like I said, I need his full attention if we’re going to complete your little plan.”

Wentworth nodded.

“Silly faggot,” Cordero added as he turned to go back to his dinner guests.

If Whitte had needed any more evidence that not all was kosher in the hotdog factory, he had it now. Ali Al-Fa’sad, the man who kicked off this entire escapade, had prominently mentioned Daniel Wentworth’s name while discussing the lawsuit in the dark office overlooking the crowded Nassau streets.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Brita whispered.

Whitte took his napkin and held it up to his mouth. “Just a bad case of indigestion.”



“Well, in God’s name, whatever you do, don’t pass gas.”

Whitte chuckled. “Hey, listen, do me a favor, stay the hell away from this Señor Cordero.”

As Cordero drew near, all Britannia could do was mouth out, “I can’t.”

Whitte frowned.

“Pardon the interruption. Now where were we?” Cordero sat and caught Whitte’s gaze. “Yes, we were discussing chess.” He turned to Brita and tossed the ten thousand dollar chip in front of her. “Be a good girl, it’s time for some adult conversation.”

Brita took the chip without looking at Cordero, smiled at Whitte and meandered to a Roulette table.

“Stunning creature,” Cordero said, almost liking his lips like a wolf. “While she is very beautiful, she also has a great deal of darkness in her. I would hate for you to be sucked into that when you are faced with such dire circumstances.”

Whitte didn’t need to be reminded. “I think we were discussing chess.”

“Yes, we were. Do you play?”

“I don’t really have the patience for it, no.”

“What a pity,” Cordero stated, “Remarkable game.

“So, are you some sort of Grand Master or something?” Whitte asked.

“Yes, in fact I am and the game has so many practical applications in the real world.”

“Such as?”

“Such as?” Cordero shifted in his seat and sat back. As he did, from out of nowhere

a waiter appeared and set snifters of brandy in front of both Cordero and Whitte. “Well, let us discuss practicalities. Let’s consider controlling governments.”

“Let’s,” Whitte said with an air of sarcasm.

“Tell me what will happen if a government runs out of money?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“They must then turn to those who have money.”

“What, like China?”

Cordero laughed. “Of course not. It will be the bankers. It will be the multi-nationals who are larger than most governments in the world. Say, for example there is a fictional country in South America. We’ll call it València, just for fun.”

“Didn’t you tell me that’s where you’re from? In Spain?”

“Yes, I did. It must feel reassuring to me.” He took a sip of brandy, savoring the taste, “Let’s say that the leader of València is a ruthless dictator who nationalizes industries in order to prop up his military and buy off the peasants by funding unsustainable social programs. Let’s also say that his nation is flush with oil and gas reserves but he spends money at a rate quicker than he can pump oil and now his nation is bankrupt.”

Whitte considered his holdings in Venezuela and how Hugo Chavez had nationalized the oil fields. “Okay, sounds like someone I know. Go on.”

“Well, of course the man is teetering on destruction. You know what peasants do to despised dictators when they take to the streets with their pitchforks and machetes. So in steps a bank. ‘We’ll save you,’ they say. ‘You can be dictator for life and live in such opulence only found in your wildest dreams.’ He is saved. ‘But of course,’ the bankers

say, 'you must do something for us in exchange.' They demand his oil fields and they demand the establishment of labor camps so that other raw materials can be exploited for finished goods. 'Don't worry,' they say to the dictator, 'you're people will be well treated. They will have enough food to fill their bellies and enough health care to keep them healthy and at peak performance for the factories.' Now, we control València. It's really quite Faustian."

"So you're the devil in all this?" Whitte interrupted.

"No, of course not. I am but a facilitator, a loyal foot soldier."

"I think you're too modest."

"Thank you," Cordero nodded. "I appreciate your observations."

"And I'm pretty sure it wasn't a compliment."

Cordero nodded with a sly smile.

"So," Whitte said, "I take it your people are out to take over Banana Republics?"

Cordero shook his head. "Of course not. We're out to take over the United States."

"Sure," Whitte laughed, "I see that happening. I think you've got it wrong. It's my government that's out taking over things. If you haven't noticed they control the auto industry, they control the banks and Wall Street through too much regulation. The way they're going, they'll have the health care industry as well. Sorry, the socialists are beating you to the punch. It can't happen."

"You think?" Cordero flashed the smile of a prowling wolf stalking his prey. "What is the one thing that your government and the Banana Republic have in common?"

"A taste for totalitarianism?"

Cordero waved him off. “They both have an addiction to spending someone else’s money and whether they know it or not, they are both bankrupt and have been for many years. Money is worthless. There is not one single national currency that is valued on an asset. You Americans had the opportunity to have yours based on petroleum when you demanded that OPEC trade only in dollars but your naïve spending pissed that away—that’s an American saying, no? Without a currency being tied to something like gold it can be as valuable or worthless as the financial industry dictates. We own assets. You’re government owns nothing.”

“They own GM.” It was meant as a joke, to poke fun at Cordero and his mania.

“They own nothing. We own the steel to make the cars. We own the gasoline used to power the cars. In time, we can snap our fingers and GM will go away as well as any government we so desire.” He paused as he sucked on his cigar. “And yes, including the United States of America. Now, you know who has more power than your worthless federal government?”

“I’m all ears.”

“You,” Cordero announced.

“Me?”

“You own petroleum reserves. You own real estate. You own intellectual property—and that is fast becoming the most valuable commodity of all. Now,” he continued, waving off Whitte before he could interrupt, “you as an entity, no. You are but a small line item, no bigger than paper clips in Exxon’s budget. But, paired with other like-minded people, you become more than a line item. Suddenly, you can dictate the terms of your

government's surrender. I don't think you understand, Jack. We want your government to control everything it possibly can because we, by proxy, will control them. Take cap and trade, for example. If a government can control carbon dioxide, it controls every aspect of an individual's life. Everything that individuals need to survive is driven by fossil fuels. Food gets to market on trucks. Every manufactured item is dependent on energy to power the factories. Each piece of clothing, every morsel one eats, the water they drink, the roof over their head is made possible by energy, an energy source that emits carbon dioxide that the government controls, and by proxy—because they spent too much money—we now control. And that, Jack, is the practicality of the game of chess.” Cordero smiled as he set down his cigar in an ashtray. “Checkmate, my friend, checkmate.”

“You're quite mad, you know.”

“No. We're quite sane. Mankind cannot evolve without a helping hand. If it is not we then mankind is left to their own devices and that, I'm sorry to say, is unacceptable.”

“This reminds me of a conversation I had with Bolo last night.”

“Bolo? You mean Anton Bolo? The world respected financial giant? I'm afraid he was not here on this island.” He smiled coyly. “Of course, Mr. Apple was here.”

“You and your silly games.”

Cordero shook his head, as if he had been in the heavens and was brought back down among the unclean. He glanced over at Whitte and then allowed his gaze to dance toward the smoky glass that separated the casino from the restaurant. Beyond the glass wall, Britannia Morgan appeared to be losing at Roulette. In fact, it was apparent that she had nearly lost the last of the ten thousand she had been given and was making wild bets to

recoup her losses. Cordero smiled reflectively and felt a twitch in his groin. Britannia Morgan was needed to keep Whitte amused but not tonight. “Jack, I’m afraid I’m tired now. There is a full day tomorrow with all of the guests. Maybe we can take up where we left off tomorrow evening?”

“Well, I guess I’m a captive audience.”

Cordero pushed in the numerical code beside the elevator bank and the door opened and he stepped on for the short one-story ride to the top floor where his suite was located. Daniel Wentworth was waiting as he stepped off. Cordero smiled.

“You were correct, Daniel. He is obstinate.”

“He will come around, Señor. Just not here, in this environment, as I predicted.”

Cordero smiled and patted his protégée on the shoulder. “Yes, you planned for every contingency. I suppose we need to plant the seed.”

Wentworth grinned and stepped into the elevator for the ride down.