

41 The Old Man and the Sea

“Who the hell is Amber Brown?” Horse asked.

“That be me,” Tiffany said with a small glimmer of a tear in the corner of her right eye.

This Robert Whitte was nowhere near the Robert Whitte she remembered. He had once been an erect, strong, stoic man, as powerfully built as her father—though as she had grown older, the image of her departed dad took on Herculean proportions. Now he was frazzled; he stooped when he walked and the potbelly seemed out of place on his basketball player frame. His grey beard was unkempt and shaggy and his deep blue eyes had crystallized and become two frozen ponds in a valley between two glacial mountains. Tiffany could tell that just seeing her had begun some thawing process.

“After my Dad died,” Tiffany explained, “Mr. Whitte kind of took my mother and me in.” She smiled at Robert. “He really helped us out.” They were sitting at a kitchen table and she reached over and patted the old man on his knee. “He sent me to college.”

Johnson shook his head. “I don’t understand. You knew the Whitte family and yet Jack didn’t recognize you?”

The old man sat up. “Jackie didn’t know shit. After his *accident*,” he paused, emphasizing the word like it was a conspiracy between he and Tiffany. He smiled at her and then at Johnson. “He pushed me away, went back to school and lost himself in academia. He knew Amber as a ten-year-old but he never got to see her grow into such a

lovely woman.” He turned to Tiffany and smiled again. “That was his loss.” He smiled.

“So,” he said, changing the subject, “you’ve seen Jackie?”

“Yes sir, about a week and a half ago.”

Johnson was about to barge into the conversation but Tiffany held up her hand.

Whitte continued.

“I’ve been following it all on TV. Got satellite so I get all the American news, for what it’s worth.” And he added, “And it ain’t worth diddly. They barbecued my boy,” he said with a chuckle. “Worse than Ted Bundy, they say.” He snorted. Then he turned back to Tiffany and patted her knee. “That Humphries fellow told me he was going to get you involved. I didn’t think that’d put you in the soup like this.”

“That’s my job,” she smiled.

“Whoa. What the fuck?” Johnson said glaringly at Tiffany. “He knows all about this? He knows about OIC and you and shit.”

“Hell, boy,” Robert piped in, “I started all this *shit*.” He turned to Tiffany. “You’re boy ain’t up to speed, now is he?”

“Hell no, I’m not up to speed.” Johnson stood and walked away from the table, shook his head in frustration, and then turned and leaned against a counter. “Let’s start with why you aren’t dead.”

“I’d prefer to be alive so that’s why I ain’t dead.”

Johnson shook his head.

“Look, I’m assuming you know about the money laundering?”

Johnson nodded.

“And I assume you know they were blackmailing me?”

“Yes, I know all that.”

Whitte smirked. “Well then you’re in the ball game son.” He stood and opened the fridge. He pulled out a brown bottle of beer. “Want one?”

Tiffany shook her head but Horse nodded. Whitte handed Horse the beer and then pulled open a drawer next to him and started pushing things around, searching through the clutter. Horse glanced over at Tiffany as he struggled with trying to twist off the cap.

Whitte retrieved an opener. “Ain’t twist off,” he said and snapped the cap off with a flick of his wrist. He then grabbed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Gave then up twenty years ago but since I’m *dead*,” he said with a wink, “don’t think they can harm me now.”

“You were about to tell us all about why we’re here,” Johnson interjected.

Whitte nodded. “Well, when the CIA operation was ended back in the eighties, they wanted to keep the channels open. I said hell no. That’s when they took Jackie and threatened to decapitate him.”

“Who are *they*?” Johnson asked.

“Hold your horses.” Then he chuckled and winked at him. “Horse.” He took a swig of beer. “European banking interests mostly. A couple of large multi-nationals. Some of the wealthier in Europe and New England. A whole host of royal scum if you ask me.”

“Then how did you get involved with these people?”

“All pals of Dick Spencer.” He paused as his mind wandered, thinking about how he had hounded Spencer to help him set up his first company, how he had signed the devil

pact and how, years later, it had destroyed everything he had ever wanted. “Look,” he finally said while nodding his head, “I paid my price for my ambition.”

“Bullshit, you’re fucking rich, man.” Horse took a look at the kitchen they were sitting in: solid stone counter tops, slate backsplashes, Sub-Zero, Thermador, and Wolf appliances, enough to give any traditional housewife back home cold sweats at night. He was sure the rest of the house was just as high-end.

Whitte’s eyes steamed over. “I live like a fucking hermit in my own prison. I can’t leave here or I’ll end up in jail for fraud. I can’t go home and see my wife, even though she probably wouldn’t know who I was...”

“No violins from this quarter,” Horse chimed in.

Whitte shook him off with his hand. “You know shit. I’ve been a prisoner to these people most of my life.” He took a swig of beer and fumed.

All the while, Tiffany was glaring at Horse. He had a mean streak and lacked total empathy. Yeah, he was the perfect cop but was far from perfect. “Ranger Johnson,” she bellowed at him. “Mr. Whitte is not on trial here. You asked him questions and he’s answering them. You will treat this witness with respect or I’ll send you back to Texas missing your balls.”

Both men flew back in shock. Fear could come from small packages and she had just given the Ranger the fear of God. He stared back at her blank faced. He knew he had crossed the line but he was tired and he was ready for this to all be over with. He liked Tiffany but if, after this was done, he never saw her again, he’d be okay with that. Still, he had to suck it up and so, placidly, he turned to the white-haired old man with a slightly

bowed head. “Mr. Whitte, on behalf of the state of Texas, I do apologize.” Making it official sounding is what he believed Tiffany expected.

For his part, Whitte was amused and he was bouncing slightly on the edge of his seat. But he played it cool. He puckered his lips and nodded. “Call me RW,” he told Horse. “Most people used to back in the day and if we come across Jackie after all this is said and done, it might get a bit confusing.”

Horse nodded solemnly.

“Good.” Whitte said, his ego back in place. “That’s settled so I’ll continue.”

Johnson rolled his eyes.

“Well, like I mentioned, once the CIA got out of the game, they were using Whitte Industries like their own money river. After Dick died, in what, ninety-one or so, the game stayed the same for a while. Then a new guy showed up, name of Salvador Cordero. Slimy bastard. Anton Bolo also got involved. Now that fellow is a devil. Should be lined up and shot on sight.” He paused as if he was actually living the moment of Bolo’s death and he smirked.

“I noticed a shift in what these sons a bitches were up to. After the CIA involvement, it was basically a way for these Euro trash to participate in business dealings undetected. Some of the things they were doing would be mildly embarrassing and highly hypocritical so that was, I guess, the value. But I never saw anything truly illegal going on; no tax evasion and so, you really couldn’t call it laundering.

“I had made a deal with Spencer to split out all of our businesses away from WO and G so when I died, Jackie would at least have something. So everything was flowing

through the new WI. Of course I was CEO and ran the legitimate side but as far as the accounting, that was a completely different group. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to know.

“About nine years ago is when I urged Jackie to get his nose out of the books and come back to work for me. I'm not a spring chicken and I wanted him to understand how to run a business. When I would eventually die, we had it set up for an automatic split: oil and gas—legitimate—and real estate, technology, and manufacturing, not so legitimate. The Group was okay with that. They felt that since WI was so well established they could afford to let the oil and gas unit go—an amicable splitting of the ways, so to speak.”

Whitte took a break for a moment. He ran his fingers through his beard, took a swig of beer and lit another cigarette and blew the smoke across the table, away from his two guests. Then he nodded. “Then they made a mistake. They brought in an IT guy by the name of Simon Patel to construct an enterprise software system to manage all of the increasingly complex accounting issues. Patel was their guy and he was fucking brilliant but he didn't know what *they* were up to. I guess whoever was running their Texas interests didn't think that maybe the guy they brought in would find all of the graft that was taking place. But he did find it. Bless his heart, he thought I was the one who was instigating this stuff but I guess he liked me because he came to me to give me a chance to fess up and turn myself in.

“I thought it was a joke at first. I honestly thought the guy knew the real reason why he was brought in so at first I sloughed it off but he started showing me individual accounts and where the money was ending up. Suddenly I felt like the worst kind of traitor there was. Right under my nose, they were flaunting U.S. laws to bring money into the

United States to influence political policies that undermined the legitimacy of the federal government. They were pushing policies that made our government beholden to outside interests and when our policies were in conflict with the outside interests, well, they held all the power: Don't change the policies and we'll destroy your currency. So many entities that are in conflict with our very way of life own our national debt. Tomorrow morning, China, for instance, can start selling our debt for pennies on the dollar. Our bonds would become worthless, our dollar less valuable than Monopoly money and we'd be back in the Stone Age by the end of the week." He shook his head. "If someone controls the money, they control everything."

Horse scrunched his face. "I don't see how this is possible. It's why we have a Congress and the courts..."

"Bullshit. Congress is full of graft. Hell half of them helped. That's the scary stuff. Their campaigns were financed through WI and about ten other privately held companies. Of course they don't know that people like Robert Whitte or Anton Bolo own them. They got money from the Goody Two-Shoes PAC but who controls that PAC? Anton Bolo or Salvador Cordero or Ali Al-Fa'sad or dozens of other sons a bitches that have no other interest than creating more wealth and power for themselves. They believe they can save humanity."

"Ali Al-Fa what?" Tiffany asked.

"Al-Fa'sad. He's the son of a bitch that blackmailed me in the first place. His son-in-law's father was tight with Spencer. They started this whole shit storm to begin with."

Johnson looked skeptical. "This is *X-Files* type shit. Grand conspiracy.

Bilderbergers. One-world government. I'll tell you what I know about conspiracies. They aren't real. Too many people have to be involved. You think these people are smart? They're dumb. Everybody is dumb. People are always saying there's some government conspiracy. Well, that's the same government that runs the Post Office or the Department of Motor Vehicles. I haven't seen them win any J.D. Power awards lately."

Whitte laughed. "I guess it does sound like I'm a snake oil salesman. Look, you've heard the term, *follow the money*, right? Well, that's all anybody has got to do. And I worked with Simon to do just that." He turned to Tiffany, "Your Humphries fellow was the same. Didn't believe a word of it, even when I showed him all of our accounts. The thing is, there are no fingerprints on any of this stuff. It looks like I take investor's money and dish it out to tons of special causes. It takes a leap in imagination to tie it all together."

Johnson shook his head. The old guy was insane! "Mr. Whitte," he began.

"RW," Whitte corrected.

"RW, can you tell me why you committed fraud by faking your own death?"

He smiled. "They were going to kill me so I beat them to it. I knew they'd get around to Jackie at some point, too, but by killing myself, it bought him some time."

"But, it's my understanding that it stipulated in your will that WI was to be spun off as a publicly traded company, exposing all of the accounting problems when the required audit was performed."

He smiled and tapped his index finger on the table. "I needed some time to get my house in order. You ever hear of the doomsday device? Well, it was a mythical device that if we blew up the Soviet Union, there would be a bomb they hid that would detonate and

wipe us off the face of the earth, even if they were all dead. I've got my own: hundreds of thousands of files dating back to 1966 that shows everything. Every month, I have to go online and reactivate the timer. If I don't, it automatically downloads the whole bunch to all of the major networks throughout the world. They control most of them but not all. What's that website, Wikileaks? Well, they'll get it as well."

Johnson blew out his frustration in one breath and glanced over at Tiffany. He couldn't tell if she were buying into any of this but then, she'd been withholding information as well. He was near enough to tell them to hell with it and leave. He'd fly back to Houston, take Cantu, his boss, up on his offer to disappear for a while and let them figure it out for themselves. He was used to going off reservation but he'd fallen off the side of the flat earth on this one.

But he was saved by the bell; in the next room, a phone rang. Whitte glanced up at the clock on the wall: Three-thirty, right on the spot.

"You're going to have to excuse me, I'm expecting a call from a business associate."

He ambled into the next room leaving Johnson and Tiffany both with exasperated looks.

Horse leaned forward and whispered, "You get the idea the guy isn't playing with a full deck?"

"Come on, Horse, show some respect. He's pushing eighty years old."

“One world government, conspiracy theories?” He shook his head, “You come on.”

“How do you know about all these conspiracy theories? Maybe you really believe in them but are embarrassed to say so.”

He shrugged it off. “There’s a radio talk show out of Austin I listen to sometimes. It gets boring on surveillance stakeouts, you know?”

Tiffany agreed with Horse’s sentiment, to a certain extent. This wasn’t the kind but forceful Robert Whitte she knew from her childhood. This man had deteriorated. He was not well groomed; his hair was long and bushy, the beard mangled, and his eyes bloodshot. He now slumped when he walked instead of the upright gait he displayed when she knew him. He babbled when before, he could say a million words with one. She realized she hadn’t seen him in over ten years but he seemed like he was a beaten man. Insane? Perhaps but she knew there were more than a few kernels of truth in what he was saying.

“Doesn’t matter if he’s telling the truth or not. We have a real situation here. These people aren’t imagined. They killed Melody, and Audrey, and Chloe. They tried to kill you and me, and Jay.”

“And Abigail.”

Tiffany frowned at that. “We’ve got to get a handle on this and find Jack and figure out what we’re going to do next. It doesn’t matter if these people are the masters of the universe or some two-bit crime family. They are a threat and we need to figure out how to neutralize it.”

From the next room they could hear the mumbled phone conversation without picking out exact words. Then, “Well don’t that blow a tick off a dog’s ass,” the elder

Whitte said loudly. Tiffany giggled. Then all they could hear were some mumbles and then a goodbye.

After another moment he reentered the room. He glanced at his two guests. "I'm expecting an old friend." He stopped and, for a moment looked at Tiffany with what appeared to be concern. "You might scare the ever-living hell out of him."

Tiffany and Horse shot a look at each other and shrugged. They glanced out the back door that they had been shown through earlier and began to leave.

"No, not you son," he said pointing at Tiffany, "just her. I've got a few things to discuss with you."

Tiffany looked hurt.

"Don't worry dear, it'll be for just a little bit. Do me a favor, go through there," he said pointing to a passage to the remainder of the house, "and go upstairs. The second door off the landing is one of my spare quest rooms. There are all kinds of female stuff in there including some bathing suits. Why don't you change into one of them and then go out back and by the last building; there's a trail that leads into the jungle. At the end you'll be treated to some magic." He smiled but then turned serious. "Just be careful of the serpents."

"Serpents?"

"Snakes. Go change. I'll tell you about them when you come back down."

Robert Whitte motioned to Horse Johnson to sit at the table. "You got a lot of questions for me. I'll try not to ramble too much. I've got to change your mind on me."

"First question then, RW. Does your son know you're alive?"

He thought for a moment. "Well, he might suspect it but no, I doubt it. I didn't want

to get him in trouble before I was ready.” He smiled, and then added, “But he’ll know soon enough.” He glanced back at the hovering Tiffany.

“Do you love him, Amber?” he asked her.

“Always have.”

He nodded his head. “You know there’s no picket fence for you there?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“No kids. He can’t have children. They busted his balls. Quite literally.”

A melancholy smile creased her lips as she turned in search of a bathing suit.