

8 The Snake

The room was muted with drawn shades fighting back the punishing tropical sun that baked the indifferent tourists, three-stories below on the wandering streets of Nassau. It was dark, he explained, because he suffered from an eye-infection. He, too, was dark as was his cruel face, a cruelty that may have been as innocuous as a birth defect or from muscle memory learned from acts of brutality. The subtleties of the man, however, were lost on Whitte who was bent over a drafting table, illuminated by the only lamp in the room, studying a nautical chart depicting an island some fifty kilometers north of Cuba.

“As I stated,” began Al-Fa’sad, his cruel features momentarily interrupted by the briefest of wispy smiles, “we have the option from the Bahamian central government to drill on Cay Sal.” His full name was Hammed bin Abdul Rahman bin Al-Fa’sad and when they had first met, he had said, “please call me Ali,” his elocution that of clipped British.

“I can see your point,” Whitte drawled, as he stood erect. He began to light a cigarette and stopped momentarily to gesture for permission from Al-Fa’sad who nodded consent. At that moment, Whitte’s eyes were captured by the dark man’s and Jack thought that he saw something there. Pity? No, loathing. Whitte drew back; the smoke lingering briefly in the light before dissipating into the darkness. “It definitely is less expensive than constructing a platform,” Whitte said, finishing his thought. He turned to look at the other man in the room. “What about the Chinese?”

“We’ve got a guy inside the Cuban Ministry of Basic Industry,” replied Jeremy Long, a squat Brooklyn-born engineer with a grating nasally voice. “They’ll execute an agreement with China next month but it’ll take them a year or so to get through their respective governmental red tape. I think we can sneak in and pull it out from under them.”

The target reservoir was gurgling beneath the artificial boundary of an exclusive watery economic zone between the communists to the south and the Bahamians to the north, making it game to whoever could drill it faster than the other. It was certainly challenging and attractive and Whitte was ready for a drink but Al-Fa’sad didn’t offer.

“We will, however, not agree to a production facility on the island,” Al-Fa’sad said. “We’re building an exclusive casino and resort. We don’t want something so ugly as that.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, Ali,” responded Whitte. “We’ll drill in from the side using a slant hole rig and we can call in a drill ship to do a subsea completion. We can construct a floating offshore loading terminal for tankers.” Whitte took a drag from his cigarette while running his hand through his long, dark hair. “Damned appealing project,” he muttered to himself.

Al-Fa’sad allowed another wispy grin to pass from his crooked mouth.

“So, you guys tell me,” Whitte continued, “the environmentalists are going to be okay with this?”

Al-Fa’sad turned his gaze to Long. “Yes.”

“And how is that going happen?” Whitte asked.

“The economy is bad; no disposable income, no tourism. Oil, on the other hand, flows regardless of whether there are children in Mickey Mouse tee-shirts rubbing their snotty noses on the legs of daddy or not,” Long said.

“Money in the right hands, my friend, always trumps environmental concerns,” said Al-Fa’sad.

“So, you’re going to bribe some son of a bitch? Forget that it’s against the law for an American company to bribe a foreign government official, it’s just damned wrong.”

“I would term it more as a *fine*,” Al-Fa’sad answered.

“So,” Whitte asked, “you’re suggesting that the government will fine this project and that money will get into the right hands?”

Al-Fa’sad nodded.

“We just don’t do business like that,” Whitte said shaking his head. “We can’t be walking into a project that’s going to get written up. Our greatest asset is our integrity. People deal with us because they know we do it right. We have a damned good track record, especially in drilling horizontal in the shale plays—and that’s the technology needed for this project—and we’ve never been fined before. I can’t do it.”

Al-Fa’sad’s expression turned dour, just momentarily, and then he squinted his eyes. “I believe we can make this into a win-win.”

Whitte hated people who spoke of *win-win* or *thinking outside of the box*, or *shifting paradigms*, or any of the other bullshit terms hucksters and consultants used to separate a company from its money.

“Mr. Whitte,” interjected Long, “what I think we can do is arrange these fines before Whitte Oil and Gas becomes a part of the project. We then sign you as a member

of our consortium to fix what we're doing wrong. It not only retains your reputation but enhances it.”

“But I'd know about the arrangement.” Whitte could tell that this subtle nuance of integrity was lost on these easily corruptible men.

Al-Fa'sad glared a dismissive tick from the corner of his eye toward the junior man and Long rose from his seat.

“Mr. Whitte, I appreciate the opportunity to present this project to you,” Long said while shaking hands with Whitte. “It was certainly a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too, Jeremy.”

Long nodded grimly to Al-Fa'sad as he left the office.

“You must forgive Jeremy. He is energetic about this project and lets his ambitions overwhelm him at times. *I* understand the subtlety of your business philosophy. I too am uneasy about the fines. We will work out an arrangement suitable to all parties concerned and if we cannot, I will not want to participate in this project either.”

Whitte doubted his sincerity and was confused by the relationship of the two presenters. “Doesn't Jeremy work for you?”

“Heavens no. He represents an engineering firm from New Jersey who does work with my consortium. I don't develop oil and gas projects though we have partnered when necessary. I look at the inclusion of WO and G as part of this project in which I'm only a small player.”

“What exactly is this consortium then?”

Al-Fa'sad poured water from a crystal pitcher and sipped delicately from the glass. He cleared his throat and explained. “There are a dozen or so closely held firms

that specialize in any number of activities throughout the world. Some are construction and engineering, others financing, and others manufacturers. If, say, I come across a parcel of land for sale in, say, South Africa that may have intrinsic value, I will speak to members of our consortium—just as we are speaking presently—to gauge interest in the property and probe ideas for value to a joint effort. Let's say that we might believe that it would be a good location for a port. I would speak with the engineering and construction firms we have within our group and maybe there might be one or two who would be willing to participate in designing and constructing the facility. I would speak to some that are in private equity offerings. I might speak to an import-export firm we have ties with and we would all come together to build the port and then share equally in its operation and profit.”

“And if the project isn't a success?”

“None of our projects have failed thus far,” Al-Fa'sad replied with a satisfied grin.

Whitte stabbed out his cigarette. “So you are inviting me to be part of this consortium?” A stream of smoke left his mouth.

“Yes.”

“You have other oil and gas companies involved?”

“No. You would be the only one,” Al-Fa'sad replied.

“How was this play discovered?”

“Purely by accident,” Al-Fa'sad said with a conspiratorial sigh. “For insurance purposes, a seismic study was conducted to ascertain that the island was not sitting upon

a fault. The engineering company suggested that there was potential for oil. We confirmed this through our source in Cuba.”

Whitte nodded with pursed lips and walked to the window and lifted a slat in the shade and peered out into the sweaty late morning. “You have never done an exploration project before?”

“No. This one would be a first.”

Whitte turned back from the window. “I’m sorry, but the answer is no. A very challenging project, one I would truly enjoy working on but I can’t jump into bed with novices. Especially people who might play loose with ethics.” Whitte studied Al-Fa’sad, seeing no visible reaction to his news one way or another. “Can I ask who’s all in this consortium?”

“You may ask but I cannot tell.”

Whitte studied the man for the first time. He had flowing thick hair so black that it almost certainly was dyed. The face was firm with small crevices around the eyes that seemed to be in conflict with the vanity of an attempted grab at youth. At first glance, the man would come across as perhaps in his fifties but Whitte could tell he was older. Much older. Possibly in his seventies. “You would be asking me to walk into a deal without knowing who my partners would be?”

“Of course not. Once you were to sign a non-disclosure agreement, all of the relevant members of our consortium would be identified and you would have the opportunity to perform due diligence before signing any binding agreement.” As Al-Fa’sad spoke, he sat behind a desk highlighted by sunlight sneaking in from the closed blinds and swiveled the chair toward the blinds, squinting.

Whitte shook his head. “Without knowing details before a non-disclosure I just cannot, in good conscious, move forward.”

Al-Fa’sad swiveled back and faced Whitte. He removed a think binder from a side drawer and pushed it across the desk. “Here is an overview of the project. I am happy to see that you are a man of integrity. You would fit in very well with the other concerns.”

Whitte doubted this. “I do hope you take the opportunity to read through this before making a final decision. While there are no indications of who is involved, you should be able to discern that they are world-class enterprises.”

Whitte walked to the desk and opened the binder. It held over a hundred pages, all written in Times Roman with small font and very little white space. Exponential tedium. He’d take it and send it back to Houston to let Gator take a look. If anything he might learn something about this mysterious man and the companies he represented. He closed the book and picked it up.

“Thank you,” Al-Fa’sad said, relieved. “May I indulge your patience for one more line of discussion?”

Whitte nodded.

“I have on retainer a consultant in New York that does work with a law firm in Texas. Munson Burkil, I believe.”

Whitte didn’t respond though there was a slight uptick in his heart.

“I understand that there is an unfortunate lawsuit.” Al-Fa’sad shook his head with a sincerity that seemed to say, tsk-tsk. “Perhaps a misunderstanding that could be alleviated?”

“I sure would like to know the name of your consultant.”

“His name is of no consequence. He was just passing along a bit of information.”

“Indulge me.”

Al-Fa’sad nodded and gestured for Whitte to take a seat. Whitte continued to stand, staring intently into the dark, snake eyes.

“Daniel Wentworth.” Al-Fa’sad put his hand to his mouth gently and coughed. “He is an interesting man. A bit of a neurotic but very talented. His firm is within our consortium. Hardcastle and Hardcastle.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Well, they are very interested in you. They were hired to perform due diligence on behalf of Munson Burkil and it stirred some interest. It seems that there is someone in our little group who would like to discuss a possible merger.”

“What, with WO and G?”

“No, I think bigger. I think they want to look at all of Whitte Industries.”

“Hah.” Whitte rubbed his nose and leaned against the side of the chair facing the Egyptian. “Now *that* wouldn’t be within the realm of possibilities.”

“Why not? It is my understanding that you have lost interest, I mean since the untimely loss of your father.”

“Well, not that it’s your business but WI is now a separate entity from WO and G. That happened at my father’s bequest. I don’t have oversight and only own a minority interest but even if I was in the position to make a decision I wouldn’t be selling.”

“You own a significant interest in WI and, from my sources, you haven’t relinquished your leadership role with the board. It is my understanding that you only

want to retain your petroleum interests and that you plan to spin off the others through an initial public offering.”

Whitte shook his head. Where the hell was this guy getting his information? Was he fishing, putting together news reports, gossip, and intuition? Was there a leak? He'd have to speak with Crosswell, if he could ever get a hold of him. “Well, I don't know who your sources are but they're wrong. Whitte Industries is a strong, vibrant concern with over a thousand of employees. We have converted much of the equity to our employees. Any sale of the company could only happen with a majority vote of the employees and the board and I can guarantee you that won't happen.”

Al-Fa'sad smiled his weak, wispy smile and put his fingers together. “Even when the employees learn of the lawsuit?”

“No lawsuit has been filed. We haven't even had preliminary discussions with the alleged plaintiff.” A vein in Whitte's temple throbbed and his eyes drew tight, targeting the smug bastard. “I don't even know why I'm having this conversation with you.” He tossed the binder onto the desk.

Al-Fa'sad leaned back in his chair, his wispy smile turning up at the corners, his eyes narrowing into slits. “You don't know, do you?” He stood so he was at eye level with Whitte. “It is on the business wires. The lawsuit was filed by Spencer Trust.”

Whitte took a step back. Why wasn't his cell phone ringing? He began to pull it out of his jacket pocket and then stopped. Don't show panic. Don't ever show panic. Whatever was happening can wait. Still, he hated being caught flatfooted. He learned a long time ago to never, ever go into a meeting blind. This had been a lapse in judgment. He was going to tear Gator a new one for buying into this guy's bullshit.

“I met your father once, you know.” He took a sip of water and cleared his throat.
“Richard Spencer was one of my dear friends. What do you know of Richard?”

Whitte narrowed his eyes. “Just that we called him Dick.”

“Of course. Well Richard worked in the Office of Strategic Services during the Second World War. It was the forerunner of your CIA, if you didn’t know.”

“Spare me the history lesson.”

Al-Fa’sad didn’t miss a beat. “He was a liaison with my daughter’s father-in-law in Belgium. I’m afraid I do not know all of the details but I do know they were very good friends. Sir Jonathon Brighton. Ever hear of him?”

Whitte shook his head; his patience was losing steam, as was he. God he wanted a drink and he wanted to sleep, and he wanted to figure out what the hell was going on and, on top of all that, he still had to give a speech in an hour. Maybe he should cancel.

The Egyptian saw Whitte’s eyes begin to glaze over. “Well, enough of an old man’s tales. Needless to say, I became friends with Richard through our mutual acquaintances and I met your father on a visit I had to Texas. He was very charming and I know his death must have been a great loss to you.” He pushed the binder toward Whitte. “I have offended you greatly with my inquiries. I apologize. Please, take the prospectus.”

Whitte hesitated for a moment. “Ali, it’s been fun but you have the wrong guy for what you’re looking for.” It suddenly dawned on Whitte that there probably wasn’t really a potential development project. Oh, maybe in someone’s fantasy but that’s not why he had been lured here. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, Ali. But if there’s business to be discussed, if the Trust is interested in a settlement of some sorts then you’re a strange point man.”

“I assure you I am not a *point man*,” he replied, obviously not understanding the expression. “I am simply conveying a message from a member in my consortium. If you are interested in selling Whitte Industries then they would very much like to speak with you.”

Whitte smiled. It was not a very confident smile. “Good to have met you.” He turned and walked out without shaking the snake’s hand.

Crossing through the permanent traffic jam that fed into the touristy Straw Market, Whitte marched into the grand entrance of the British Colonial Hilton with its fifty-foot ceiling supported by golden beams. Past the elevator bank was a roomy lounge. He settled into a table that overlooked the swimming pool and manmade beach. A woman in a tight bikini playing sand volleyball attracted his attention. He watched her sleek body react to the high ball hit above the net. She tried to spike it but came up short. Her breasts were large and in a brief moment, Whitte was not thinking about the general state of his life. The cocktail waitress came and he ordered a T&T. He leaned back in the chair and lit a cigarette. Thank God the smoking Nazis hadn’t made it to Nassau yet. He could smoke in a bar and enjoy a drink and be left alone and leave everyone else alone.

Now, without prying eyes, he pulled his cell phone out and realized he had neglected to turn it back on once he landed while rushing to the ill-fated meeting with Al-Fa’sad. After booting up, the phone showed there were messages out its ass. He looked at the recent calls. All were from WO&G management team members but not one from George Crosswell. Whitte immediately called him. Still no answer. Now his anger toward

George had completely dissipated, replaced with heavy concern. He searched his contact list until he found Mary Catherine Dawson's number. She answered on the first ring.

"Was about to call you." She sounded out of breath. "I just got off the phone on a conference call with Mo Boucher and Laura Menzinger. I feel a lot better than I did when I got the call that they filed."

"I'm coming back."

"Absolutely not. We don't need you breathing down our neck. Look, Laura is good. She made some excellent points and we believe the suit is very weak. I mean these are issues that go back almost fifty years. If there was a problem with fulfillment of the original contract and that's a big *if*, then it's a matter of their side proving it. Their contention is that they do not have documents releasing the property back to the Trust nor do they have records of payment by W O and G. The big problem is that it's not the Trust's prevue to go back and settle Spencer's estate and that's what this boils down to. All of that was handled through probate in 1990 when he died. To now go back and try to reopen that settlement is going to be difficult at best. And even if they can achieve that, they then have to prove that we perpetrated a criminal conspiracy to short them money. Laura thinks this is a shakedown, pure and simple. They don't have shit."

"So, I don't need to worry, is what you're telling me."

"Not right now, no."

Whitte crushed the spent cigarette into an ashtray and lit another. He signaled the cocktail waitress for another drink. "So, it's frivolous?"

"I won't go that far but yeah, unless there is some evidence floating around out there that we don't know about."

Some evidence? Yeah, that was always the case and always, it seemed, that evidence would turn up. Whitte turned and saw a balding, middle-aged man with horn-rimmed glasses perched on his nose approaching.

“Mr. Whitte?” the man whispered, trying not to disturb the phone call but trying to get his attention all the same. Whitte motioned he’d be a minute.

“Mary Catherine, have you heard from George?”

“It was his secretary, ah...”

“Latoya.”

“Yeah. George had left her instructions to call me to set up the conference call between Laura and Mo.”

“Where the hell is he?”

“Wyoming. Hunting. You didn’t know?”

“Hunting?”

“Latoya said it had been booked for months.”

He’s in Wyoming where there’s probably no cell phone reception, Jack thought. A weight of worry lifted off his chest.

“Look, Jack. This isn’t going to be solved with you back home. It’s going to be long and drawn out. I doubt there will be any new information before the end of the month. You’re there in paradise. Find a distraction.”

He glanced over to the volleyball girl, her bronze skin shimmering with tanning oil and perspiration. Yes, he thought, this is a perfect distraction. “Okay, Mary Catherine.” He looked back at the man patiently waiting. “The guy’s here to take me up to the conference. I’ll call you afterward.”

“No. Do not call me. I’ll check in with you when you return. I already heard from your corporate PR guy. They have a handle on it and have declined to comment until George comes back.”

After thanking Mary Catherine, Whitte hung up and took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“I’m Harrison Alexander,” the man said with a smile and outstretched hand. “I want to thank you for agreeing to the lunch keynote.”

“No problem, Harrison,” Whitte said as he stood, “They serve grownup drinks at the luncheon?”