

The Caribbean Affair

By Frederick Hink

*Banking establishments are more dangerous than standing armies.*

—Thomas Jefferson

*Give me control of a nation's money and I care not who makes the laws.*

—Mayer Amschel Rothschild

Prologue—Twenty-five years ago

There is a darkness that is brightest when temptation is greatest. It blinds a man, induces him, makes him welcome all the while the flesh burns from the body as the sin takes hold. The darkness can enter through fruity drinks, and song, and laughter, and absent promises and it turns and twists into a man's heart like a worm in an apple. Young Jack Whitte had bitten the fruit, sowed the seed, and did not know that he would now be plunged into that blinding darkness. He lay naked on a deserted beach next to a naked woman. The water of the Caribbean gently lapped on the spongy sand as the sun grudgingly peaked over the far-off barrier reef. Whitte stirred.

For a moment, there was no thought, no physical feeling, only warmth that lifted his soul and permeated the grogginess.

She lay on her stomach with crumpled clothes as a pillow. She breathed easily and deep. Her golden skin, like an olive ripening in the sun, held no tan lines and it begged him to touch her gently but he did not. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes and then sheepishly peeked at her peaceful body again. Her long, dark, curly hair crept over her shoulder and onto the sand. He followed the hair down to the small of her back and there; it jumped out at him as pure violence. A scar, about three inches long, was cut deeply across her lower back just above the part in her buttocks, marring what was a perfect body. The pain she must have endured frightened him. The scream must have been blood curdling and he wanted to reach out to her, take her into his arms, brush the long curls away from her

face, and shield her from any future hurt but instead, he turned away.

He had flown into Belize a week before and after landing, caught a bus into the country's interior. With the help of a guide, he repelled down a sinkhole and camped on its floor. The next morning he had inflated a rubber raft, packed his gear and with only the light of a miner's hardhat, paddled through the underground river deep into the cave system where he came across a beach. He pulled the raft out of the water and climbed back into a cave system where Mayans had performed religious ceremonies. There were shards of pottery and black soot rings on the ceiling. After returning to the raft, he paddled out into the sunlight and floated on the lazy river some 100 yards from the cave where the guide retrieved him and dropped him off where he could catch another bus that took him to the highlands.

After a night in a shack that had been advertised as a hotel, he hiked back into the jungle and up the side of a mountain where he came across an archeological dig into a newly discovered Mayan temple. He spent a few days there, exploring the surrounding site and making friends with the archeologists, and then hiked down the mountain and into the heart of the southern jungle. There had been a tense moment as he came across a jaguar that eyed him with suspicion as it moved across the path ten yards ahead and back into the jungle. Had he truly seen this or was it a ghost? After another hour, he hit the outskirts of a Mayan village. Their poverty frightened him as he walked through, receiving only tentative glares that regarded him as he had regarded the jaguar. When he made it to the main road, he flagged down a bus and traveled back to Belize City where he caught the ferry to Ambergris Cay where he was going to deep-sea fish.

He had wanted adventure with a hint of mystery and he hadn't been disappointed. Most of his friends had headed to Europe to perform the college graduation ritual of youth hostels and summer flings before starting life but not Jack. He had lived adventure and had now found the mysterious part at the end of a bar under a thatched covered hut that faced the ocean. She said her name was Anais and they had conversed for a while and became intoxicated together and then had strolled down the isolated beach until they reached a point where they both stripped and ran into the water. They danced together under the billion pinpricks of light above and then they had made love for the first time.

Now, sand had worked its way into every spot on and in his body where nature hadn't intended it to be. Shaking the image of torn flesh that had forced itself into his mind, he rose and ran into the lapping water, through the sea grass and out into the protected gulf between the shore and the barrier reef 300 yards away. Once the water was chest deep, he dove with closed eyes and swam underwater for thirty seconds. He emerged; wiping the water from his eyes and then ran his fingers over his crew cut hair, the bristles flicking the water from his scalp, sparkling like someone had poured glitter over his head. He glanced back to Anais and she was still asleep. A sudden emptiness filled his body as the tango that was the night before was fading and the dream that would reverberate through his nightmares had begun. And, besides that, he realized he was ravenous; he needed her and he needed food; he returned to shore.

He looked at their scattered clothes and wanted to dress but would this be, somehow, inappropriate to dress first? He knelt down by her face and gave her a gentle kiss, a touch, slight across her cheek. She turned onto her back and stretched—feeling out

for where he had been—and slowly opened her eyes, squinting at the rising sun. She turned toward his hovering body and smiled.

“Good morning,” he said.

She stretched, “I’m famished,” her accent reflecting a far-off world of which Whitte knew nothing. “I need food.”

He held out his hand and she rose, caressing his face. They kissed and then she ran off into the water and washed herself while he dressed. He slipped on his sandy shorts and tee shirt, found his sandals and slipped them on as well. Sand once again was a nuisance that he hoped a good shower would alleviate.

He watched her dress—not sure how much he should watch and how much he should avert his eyes—but she smiled and the warmth of her smile enveloped him. He wanted her again and almost began to take his clothes off but refrained.

They strolled down the virgin beach of coconut palms and sea grass toward the dusty town of San Pedro. He watched a small sailboat motor through the waters, its sails tucked tightly around the mast. He could see breakers over the reef and he paused to contemplate a possible future in this paradise where he could fish and swim, drink and eat. And make love.

*To hell with the world,* he thought, *to hell with the life he was expected to live and the responsibilities that were inherent with that life. To hell with his dreams.*

She watched him as he lost himself and grabbed his hand and pulled him back to her and reached up and kissed him fully on his lips, taking him into her arms and reaffirming his musings.

“I know, Jack,” she said with a glimmer in her eye, “It is a paradise and it should last forever. Can we make it last forever?” Her voice was lusty and direct and intoxicating and, though corny, it was as if they had been together a million years. He studied her and saw her eyes desperately wanting him to draw into her, to feed her own desires.

They found a small bakery where the sweet smell of pastries dragged them in. They bought two rather ugly cinnamon rolls and walked a few feet away to a fruit stand where they purchased a mango. They took their feast down to the beach to a small rickety picnic table under the shade of a cohune palm. The sun was now rising with gusto and the heat would soon descend to bake the beach and turn the spongy sand into a smoldering skillet.

Jack retrieved his pocketknife and peeled back the mango as Anais tore a piece of the roll and pushed it into his mouth. The taste was sweet and the texture light like a croissant and he turned to her, mouth open for another feeding. She laughed.

“Not before you give me some mango,” she demanded.

He stripped a piece from the rough pit and tough skin and slid it into her open mouth from the knife blade as juice dribbled down her chin. Her eyes closed and she smiled. He laughed.

The food was quickly consumed and they walked to the bed and breakfast where he had rented a small cottage the day before. Jack jumped into the shower first, its icy tentacles cutting through him as it washed away the sand and salt and Anais quickly followed. They embraced and took turns washing each other and then fell into the bed, making love before falling asleep. They awoke hours later and made love again and after, found the need for more food.

They dined in a small clapboard restaurant 100 yards from their cottage where she ate sautéed crab and shrimp with a butter and wine sauce over a bed of rice. He ate a Wahoo steak with butter and limejuice and a side of grilled mango. Both washed it down with a Belizean sweet medium-bodied lager called Belikin. The word *Belikin*, the indifferent buxom woman who served their food had told them, meant “road to the east.”

On his second beer, Jack raised the bottle and gave a toast, “To the road to the east.”

Anais smiled tentatively and swallowed the last bite of crabmeat. She wiped her mouth with a cloth napkin, seemingly to wipe away a thought and asked, “So, Jack, why are you really here?”

“I told you. I’m here to escape the trappings of Western civilization,” he said, swigging from the brown bottle.

“What is it Americans’ say? Bullshit?”

Jack laughed and finished off the last swig of lager, motioning to the uninterested woman for *uno mas, por favor*. “I’m telling you the truth. I came for the adventure.”

“You’re too refined for a vagabond.”

“I just finished my undergrad. I’m about to head to the Navy. I’m going to fly jets.”

“You don’t strike me as a pilot, Jack Whitte.”

“If I’m not a vagabond and I don’t strike you as a military man, then what am I?”

She smiled, “I haven’t decided yet.” She sipped at her beer and then coyly asked, “Can I be your reason to drop off the face of the earth?”

“I have to go back to Houston in three days. I leave for Pensacola in a week.”

Her eyes looked sad as she playfully pushed a pouted lip forward.

“Or maybe I’ll stay in paradise a while longer,” he suggested with a swig of beer.

She laughed. “Are you always that easy to persuade?”

He smiled, “No.”

She took a sip from the beer. “Then where do we start?”

He motioned with his thumb toward the cottage. “Back in bed.”

As they rose and began the walk to their cottage, two men, both dark and powerful, slithered from the shadows and followed them. One was quite large, his arms so powerful that he couldn’t rest them on his sides. He wore his long dark hair in a ponytail and on his right forearm was a tattoo of a black cobra wrapped tightly around a crimson crescent moon. For as long as Jack Whitte lived, he would never forget the man who was called Azra’il.

The little girl sat alone with hands folded in her lap and was dressed in her Sunday best with pale blue dress with white fringe and patent leather shoes that reflected the soul sapping florescent lighting of the hospital corridor. Her hair was parted down the middle and held in place by barrettes decorated with butterflies. She clutched a small handbag that matched her shiny black shoes. It was quiet in the hallway allowing her hushed sobs to echo unchecked.

At the far end of the hallway, a door opened and clanked shut. She heard heavy footsteps walking in a slow cadence and the man sat down next to her. She didn’t look up.

“Are you Tony’s daughter?” His voice was strong, purposeful but gentle.



The little girl nodded her head. She glanced sideways at a tall handsome man with short gray hair. His face sported a couple days worth of growth and his eyes were tired.

“You sure are pretty.”

“No. I’m not,” she whispered.

“Ah, believe me, I’ve been around some awful pretty women in my life and you are prettier than they are.”

She didn’t respond.

“Let’s go see him.”

She hesitated though she desperately wanted to see her father. “My mom told me I couldn’t be in there,” she sniffled.

“Ah, to hell with that. I’m paying the freight so she’s got to let us in.”

The girl with chestnut blond hair rose and reached up for the man’s hand. He smiled and took it, towering over her like a lighthouse on a stormy cliff. He turned and pushed open the door and they both entered reverently.

The girl’s mother stood and quickly wiped the tears from her eyes. “Mr. Whitte. Thank you so much for coming.”

Robert Whitte smiled tenderly and waved her off with his hand. The little girl darted from behind him and rushed to the hospital bed.

Tony Brown was dying. His black hair was patchy. This once powerful man with broad shoulders and barrel chest was ashen and sunken. Only his large calloused hands reminded anyone of what he had been just months before. The little girl’s mother looked on with apprehension as her daughter ran and clutched at Tony’s thick hairy arms. “Oh,

Daddy.” She began quietly crying again.

“I’m sorry, she looked lonely out there.”

The mother squinted through her anguish. “It’s okay. We’re waiting for the doctor. I didn’t think it was a good idea for her to be in here when he comes in.”

Whitte stood with his hands on his hips, his lips pursed. The exhaustion he was feeling was showing in his face. “He’s a strong son of a bitch,” Whitte said. The mother smiled.

Just then there came a rap at the door and in strolled a man in a white lab coat, tucking a slender pair of reading glasses into his breast pocket while clutching a clipboard chart. Whitte nodded at him while the mother drew back hesitantly.

“Why don’t you let me take your daughter for ice cream?” Whitte turned to the little girl and winked. “I think they want us out of here. Time for some adult talk.”

The little girl nodded and then gave her father a kiss on his cheek. Tony Brown didn’t stir.

Whitte held open the door for the little girl.

“Mr. Whitte, I can’t thank you enough for what you’re doing,” the mother said.

“No need,” he replied and followed the girl from the room. Once in the hallway, the girl grabbed his hand and they walked to the far end from where Whitte had come.

“I’m here to see your papa, you know. But my little boy is all banged up too. He’s upstairs. You want to see him with me?”

“Is he my age?” she asked.

“How old are you?”

“I’m ten.”

“Oh, heavens no. My Jackie is twenty-two. But I think you might like him.”

“How do you know if I’ll like him?”

He looked down at her. “Well, maybe you won’t,” he laughed.

They entered the stairwell with several vending machines. Whitte pulled some change from his pocket. “You want an ice cream sandwich? That’s my favorite.”

She nodded.

He slid a dime into the machine and pulled the knob. He handed her the ice cream novelty and purchased two more. “If my son wakes up, he might want one too.”

They climbed to the next floor and then began the walk down the hallway to Jack Whitte’s room.

“Is you’re son sick like my Daddy?”

“No. Some bad people beat him up.”

Robert Whitte pushed the door open and the little girl poked her head around the corner, black cakey crumbs at the edge of her mouth. The young man was asleep, breathing shallowly.

“Is he in a coma like my Daddy?”

“Kind of,” the man said. “They hit him upside the head pretty good and broke him up some. The doctors say he’s going to be okay, though. He just needs some rest.”

“Why did they beat him up?”

The man rubbed his rough whiskers and shook his head. She could see that a thought stumbled at his lips and he paused, realizing that he was speaking with a ten year

old. She hated it when adults did that. "I'm just damned glad I could get him home." He handed the third ice cream sandwich to the little girl. "Here, I guess he's not going to wake up just now. Why don't you eat it so it doesn't melt."

They sat in chairs next to the bed, Robert Whitte watching the little girl finish her ice cream as he took the last bite of his.

"Where's his mother?" she asked.

"She's traveling in Europe. She hasn't made it back yet but she'll be here tomorrow I think." He sat back in his chair and scratched the back of his head. "Do you know how to sing? His mama used to sing to him when he was a little boy. Maybe it will help him wake up."

"I don't sing very well."

"I'm sure you have a pretty voice but you don't have to."

The little girl looked unsure of what to do.

"Well, it's okay," he said sensing her unease. "Maybe I can walk you back to where you're papa's at."

Whitte escorted her back to her father's room just as the doctor was leaving. He glanced to the little girl's mother who shook her head. Whitte's heart sank. After fighting off more thanks from his employee's wife, he turned and left. The little girl sat down next to her dying father.

Later that night, when her mother had fallen asleep on the chair in the corner of the cramped room, the little girl grabbed her small handbag and returned to Jack's room. His father wasn't there so she sat down on a chair to his left.

Jack was a handsome boy, she decided, just like his father. His eyes were held shut by puffy, purple flesh but it did not take away from his strong features. She rubbed her hand across the gauze bandage wrapped on his head and smiled and then kissed his cheek. Jack's ribs had been broken and because of the heavy bandages, he did not wear a shirt. The sheet was pulled up under his bare arms exposing a long gash on his left shoulder that had twenty-six stitches holding it together; she had counted them. She gently kissed his shoulder just like her mother did when she had a scrape. She wanted to make him feel better. She opened her handbag and retrieved a folded blank sheet of paper and pulled out a few crayons and began coloring a *get-well-soon* picture of him with the sun shining on a tropical island with one lone palm tree surrounded by blue sea, because that's where his father had told her he had been. She began humming *Somewhere over the Rainbow*, the same song her mother would sing to her when she was younger.

As she was putting the finishing touches to her masterpiece, the young man coughed, and then mumbled a strange word to her, "Anais."

Startled, she rose and started to leave.

"No, wait," he said weakly. "Are you an angel?" He was delirious.

She turned and edged closer to his bed. "No, I'm Amber."

Jack Whitte smiled and then fell back into a deep sleep.