

The Newest Babylon

Jack English

Chapter One: Fund Raiser

Money is the lifeblood of politics, and raising money is its curse. No one knew that better than Jim Whitehead. His ability to attract money propelled him from lawyer and businessman, to political fundraiser, to congressman, then to the governor's mansion of the great state of New Jersey. His first and only standing order was to raise money whenever, wherever, and as often as possible.

~

A Seasprite helicopter emerged from a soft, fluffy cloud into a starry sky. Due south, across a couple miles of salt marsh and back bays, the Atlantic City skyline stretched, like a string of pearls along the abyss of the Atlantic Ocean.

"Governor," the pilot shouted over his headset. "We're cleared to land at the Sphinx. Should be there in five minutes."

"Thanks, Mike. Smooth flying as usual. I got a lot of paperwork done on the way down."

The pilot smiled as he rolled the State Police helicopter into a shallow bank out over the ocean before coming straight in toward the casino.

Governor Whitehead saw Vincent McManus, his Lt. Governor, on the helipad and waved to him. McManus had been a state senator from Atlantic

County and his connections to Atlantic City's money men had proven invaluable.

The pilot eased the craft to the ground like a feather.

Whitehead jumped out and started toward McManus, his bodyguard, Corporal Fred Capano, in tow. "Vincent," the Governor shook his hand. "What are we in for?" He glanced past McManus to Major Anthony Morrison of the State Police.

"A little fundraiser, Governor. The people you'll be meeting are a sort of ex officio Democratic Committee. All you have to do is make a quick speech, grab a bite to eat, press the flesh and leave. You should be in and out in an hour."

"Sounds good, but what are they going to do for us?"

"We've got about twenty people here. I expect them to pledge about a thousand each."

"That's my boy." Whitehead made a mock swing at his jaw.

Manus stopped Capano. "No uniforms tonight, Corporal. This is pure politics."

"Respectfully, sir," Capano said, "as the Governor's bodyguard, I go where he does."

"Not tonight. Colonel Morrison will handle security from here." McManus jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Morrison wore a black suit instead of his state police uniform.

"I'll be OK," the governor reassured him, and walked away.

McManus led the Governor to a ballroom, and

waved everyone to their feet. They broke into polite applause.

Governor Whitehead gave a ten-minute political pep talk. When he was done, McManus grabbed the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, the buffet is open. And since the Governor is on a tight schedule, I'm going to ask you to let our guest of honor be first in line."

Whitehead waved to the crowd again as he headed toward the buffet.

The buffet looked like a thousand others Whitehead had endured over his political career, a string of chafing dishes containing non-descript food. But the last dish...

Governor Whitehead's plate was practically full when he reached the last chafing dish. He lifted its lid. There, in front of him, was a mountain of hundred-dollar bills, banded together in neat paper wrappers each bearing the inscription \$10,000.

Whitehead stood, the steel lid in hand, then turned on McManus. "What the hell is this, Vincent?"

"Just a little token of our appreciation, Jim. Help yourself."

"Like hell!" Whitehead slammed the lid down. It wasn't until then that he realized he was alone with McManus and Morrison.

"Who were those people?" Whitehead demanded. "They were no political committee."

"Jim, they're just a bunch of people who want to be your friends."

"Be my friends? And what? My shadow government? My kitchen cabinet? And whisper in my ear now and then?"

"Thirty years in politics, Jim. You know how it works. A man in your position needs friends."

"I'm getting the hell out of here," Whitehead snapped as he strode to the door.

"Wait, Jim. Let's talk!" McManus said. But by the time he reached the door, Whitehead was in the elevator for the roof top helipad. "Jim!"

Whitehead exited the elevator and marched toward the helicopter, making circular signals in the air with his hand.

~

The pilot looked out the window and saw the Governor steaming toward them, the Lt. Governor trailing a dozen yards behind and Morrison trailing behind him. "Fred, look! The old man is pissed about something!" He started through his check list and punched the starter motor. The engine let out a whine for a split second before the main turbine kicked in, drowning out everything else. "Let's get ready. He's in one of his abrupt moods."

"Sure thing, Mike!" Capano stood by the helicopter door.

Whitehead jumped aboard and smacked the back of the pilot's seat. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Before Capano could close the door, the pilot had pulled back on the control yoke, launching five tons of metal skyward.

"Mike," Whitehead leaned over the pilot's

shoulder, "see if you can get the Trenton Barracks to track down the Attorney General. I've got to talk to her right away."

"Trouble, Governor?" Capano asked.

"There's no trouble like trouble in your own house, Fred. And we've got trouble big time."

~

McManus watched the helicopter fly across the city and back out over the bay. Morrison stepped up behind him. "He's going to spill the beans, isn't he?"

McManus nodded. "I didn't think it would work. Just thought I'd give it a try. So much neater that way."

"You want to make the call?" Morrison handed him a cell phone.

"No." He handed it back. "You can make it."

Two blocks away, an antenna on another casino picked up the signal and transmitted it to a phone aboard the Governor's helicopter. The phone used Bluetooth to wirelessly connect to an earbud which ignited a milligram of hydrogen azide embedded in the smokeless gunpowder that had been packed into it. The earbud had been wedged behind the wiring harness of the helicopter's electronic controls.

"Governor," the pilot shouted over his headset, "Attorney General's not home. They're trying to find her now."

"Thanks Mike. We..."

The instrument panel in front of the pilot exploded, knocking him unconscious. His hand went limp on the control yoke.

"Mike!" the Governor shouted. "Mike! Mike!" The cabin filled with dense smoke as the helicopter's turbine poured eleven hundred horsepower to the spinning blades, no longer under the control of the pilot.

Whitehead felt his way forward. "Fred!" Whitehead yelled. "Help me get Mike out of the way!"

Whitehead climbed into the co-pilot's seat and wrapped his hands around the control yoke.

"You know how to fly this thing, Governor?" Capano shouted.

"No, not a clue!" Whitehead shouted back.

The helicopter began to rotate slowly and Whitehead jerked on the controls to stop it. As he did, the machine slipped backwards, tipped over and plunged upside down into a vast, dark, sea of twisted pines and scrub oak called the Pine Barrens.

Chapter Two: When Buses Fly

Jack English was a local boy in a town where it still mattered. The billions that poured into the casino industry couldn't alter the fact that there was a locus of power, hidden beneath the surface, where decisions were made, permits granted and projects blocked. A word between two people who went to Atlantic City High School, or people who used to work at the White House Sub Shop, or had an uncle who peddled curly fries on the Boardwalk was more

powerful than all the Philadelphia lawyers and their expensive suits. Everybody was in on this network of locals, the Judge whose daughter worked for a law firm, the lawyer who had a cousin that sold supplies to City Hall, the Mayor whose barber's son needed a recommendation to law school. Even lawyers who fought each other in court were pretty cozy once they left the courthouse.

It wasn't as though Jack English flaunted convention. He just didn't care. He set his own course and navigated by his own convictions, and if that didn't suit other people, it was too damned bad.

When the New York law firm of Snick, Snyderman and Cranz wanted to open an office in Atlantic City, they called Jack English. He knew everyone and was respected by friends, foes and judges as a straight shooter. He was the perfect front man.

They sent a limo to pick him up and offered to triple what he was making as a sole practitioner. But when he saw their slick New York office, he knew it wasn't for him. They saw themselves as a professional firm. He saw a slave ship where partners worked fifty hours a week and associates worked sixty hours a week so that senior partners could pull down seven figures. Snick Snyderman was stunned when he declined.

A week later, Sid Cranz showed up at his house with a top of the line BMW. "Jack, this is your ticket to the big time. We want you and we're willing to deal." He threw him the keys. "It's yours if

you want it."

English stroked the smooth metal of the key and rubbed his thumb over the computer security chip buried in it. The 500 horsepower V-10 would make it slick as... well, slick. Then he glanced at his '1986 Nissan 300ZX.

"Thanks, but I don't want much in a car. All I want is one that goes so fast, it makes my gums bleed." He tossed the key back. The price was too high. As soon as the key left his hand, as soon as he knew he had absolutely, irrevocably killed the Snick Snyderman offer, he felt free.

He knew the soul-killing compromises he'd have to make if he joined their firm. He saw it in the quiet desperation of the lawyers around him. He saw it in his friends.

He wanted to be his own man, free to say what he wanted, when he wanted, the consequences be damned. Once, he was in court watching a trial that revolved around whether a company should have known a five-hundred-ton factory roof could get torn off in a hurricane, fly a hundred yards, and kill somebody. The defendant's engineer was on the stand and was asked whether it was foreseeable. He said, "It depends on the shape of the roof."

Impatient with the slow and technical nature of the testimony, the Judge flew into a rage, castigating the engineer for bringing junk science into his court room. The engineer and the lawyers trying the case were so cowed by the judge's ferocity, they were speechless.

English couldn't bear to watch the engineer being excoriated and stood in the back of the courtroom. "Your Honor, of course shape makes a difference. Why do you think airplanes fly and buses don't!"

The judge fined him five hundred dollars for contempt of court, but that didn't matter. He'd done the right thing; the consequences be damned. After that, his standing in the bar association rose dramatically as lawyers, tired of being bullied by judges, rallied around him.

Chapter Three: Trial List

Atlantic County Courthouse

Jack English's khaki suit stood out in the sea of dark blue and charcoal grey suits around him. Forty, with longish, swept back, brown hair, his ruggedly handsome face was tanned and wind-blown. At six-four, he was able to look over the crowd waiting for the bailiff to unlock the courtroom. One lawyer in particular caught his eye. It was a vigorous sixty-five-year-old, wearing a two thousand-dollar, grey, pinstriped suit who held his own brand of court in one corner of the hall.

Jay Herndon was the king of torts in Atlantic County, bringing tens of millions of insurance company dollars into the local economy and creating gainful employment for scores of defense lawyers. English used his old, overstuffed, leather

briefcase as a prow to gently make his way through the crowd. "How ya' doin' Jay? You and Samantha have a good time in the islands?"

"Morning, Jack," Herndon smiled. "We did nothing but lie on the beach, drink margaritas and screw our brains out. So, what's been happening while I was gone?"

"Did you hear McManus appointed Buddy Anderson Chairman of the Casino Control Commission?"

"Ralph Buddy Anderson, General Counsel of the Sphinx? No shit! What did Carter say?"

Gordon Carter, owner of the Sphinx Casino, controlled it with an iron hand, or was it an iron fist?

English shrugged. "You know, regrets that Anderson was leaving, that sort of thing. Crocodile tears."

"I figure Anderson was pulling down four, maybe five hundred large from the Sphinx," Herndon said. "Chairman of the Casino Control Commission makes what? Maybe two hundred? So, what's in it for him?"

"What indeed, Jay? What indeed?"

As the courtroom doors were unlocked, two dozen lawyers pushed forward. The bailiff walked to the front of the courtroom. "This is today's trial list. Please answer when your case is called, Schwartz v. Hagen."

"Plaintiff ready, Your Honor." Herndon stood and addressed the judge.

Judge Hillman looked over his half glasses.

"Good morning, Mr. Herndon, we've missed your dramatic flair."

"Been in the islands, Your Honor." Herndon splayed his fingers under his face to show off his tan.

A young insurance lawyer stood. "Defense ready."

"Your trial is assigned to Judge VanName, Mr..." The judge looked down the trial list to find his name. "Mr. Wolk, follow Mr. Herndon, he'll show you the way."

~

At lunch, many of the local lawyers adjourned to Flannigan's Bar and Grill. Flannigan's was at the end of a wide blind alley, between two old brick buildings, across the street from the Court House. The alley opened up into a courtyard. On three sides, glass windows allowed those in the courtyard to see who was sitting at the bar and restaurant inside. Lawyers called it the clubhouse.

Jack English settled his case with Bernie Rothman, a defense lawyer, and they adjourned to the clubhouse for a drink. Roy Packett, the county prosecutor, and Jay Herndon joined them.

Jay Herndon was always angling for a good case and often discussed it with his friends.

"Have you figured a way to get a piece of the Whitehead crash?" Packett asked

"I tried to talk to the Governor's widow at the funeral, but there were too many people there. I gave her my card, but she already had cards from

three other attorneys. But, so far as I know, she hasn't retained anybody yet. Say, did you hear the story about Governor Whitehead flying across the state with Gordon Carter? Carter threw a hundred dollar bill out of the window and Whitehead asked why he did it. Carter said he figured somebody would find the hundred and it would make them happy. Well, you know Jim Whitehead, he could never leave well enough alone, so he asked Carter, why he didn't throw out two fifties and make two people happy... or even better, five twenties and make and make five people happy? Carter looked at him and said, why don't I throw you out and make a million people happy?"

"That's pretty low Jay, slamming the dead," Packett said.

"Whitehead's death didn't hurt the casinos any." English tapped the headline in the Atlantic City Press. It read, "Casino Excise Tax Cut Twenty Percent."

"That doesn't sound like much," Rothman said.

English looked at Rothman while he spoke. "Jay, how much is that in dollars?"

Herndon looked around the table until he was sure he had everyone's attention. "I'd say it's enough to get McManus reelected forever. What do you think, Roy?"

"It's only politics," Packett spread his hands.

"Whitehead's death didn't hurt you any, did it, Roy?" Herndon shot back.

"What do you mean?" he snapped.

"It's no secret you've been badgering McManus for a judgeship."

"You have no proof of that!"

"Look," Rothman said, "I for one would die for a judicial appointment. I don't want to end up like Fred Bitner." Fred Bitner was the latest Atlantic County lawyer to commit suicide.

English looked around the table, at the cries of quiet desperation he was hearing from his friends. He raised his glass. "Well there's something I can drink to, no more Fred Bitners."

**Buy the whole novel as an Amazon eBook
for \$2.99**