

2 The Devil's Playground

He floated in the azure water between light and dark, bottom and surface and that space between light and dark was comforting for it was apathy that he sought. He exhaled and followed the bubbles and as he broke surface he saw her laying lazily on a flat smooth boulder. She rose, her naked body shimmering in the light, and she smiled. She loved him and he loved her and she waved to him. He floated on his back and watched cotton puffs float by in the deep blue sky and he was content. This was heaven and he realized he could have this for the rest of his life if he so chose.

She called to him, playfully, lustfully. She executed a perfect dive. He dove into the water wanting to embrace her but she continued shooting into the darkness below and he believed she was playing and so he sank further. His lungs began to burn and he paused to look to the surface and he was almost too deep but the girl sank like a weight, deeper and deeper as the floor of the pool sank further and further into the darkness. He kept sinking and just as his lungs began to explode he turned to the surface struggling toward the light. He broke surface and gasped for air. His lungs were ablaze and he felt water engulf them. It added to the fire and he coughed it out. He took a deeper breath and dove again. Light no longer penetrated the water. The warmth was replaced by a burning cold and his flesh felt as if it were being ripped from him. He sank further realizing no matter how much oxygen he could take into his lungs, no matter the pain he could endure, the darkness would grow darker and he could never return to the water's edge.

It was a thought, really, at first, but the thought evolved to a plan and the plan into the need for action and so he opened his mouth and began to breath and the darkness entered and he was alone...

And as the light broke over a bluff and a dawn approached leaving the darkness to scurry off to its dark place, a force, a hand with no fingers reached into the darkness and he felt the pull and the struggle to the surface.

Jack Whitte's awakening was harsh and he gasped for air. He wanted to be back in the dream—he never really accepted these repeating messages as nightmares—for she, the one with no true identity was always there and always gave him the opportunity to find her but thus far, it had only been frustrated failure.

He stretched in his sleeping bag and the coolness of the night left him stiff and uncomfortable. A boulder the size of a pea pressed on his sensitive ass and it still stung and he needed coffee before he could move. He also had to piss like a racehorse. It was a conflicted moment that almost brought tears. He was alone in a tent with only the sound of trickling water—teasing his bladder—somewhere in the distance. He would have to make the coffee, a task that seemed beyond his placid ambition, before he could relieve himself because otherwise it would take too damned long before he could begin to live again with the influx of caffeine.

He left the tent, the sleeping bag draped around his naked body, and retrieved a lighter and lit the camp stove, the awakening of a source of power that burst with a *swoosh*. He measured the coffee, battling his bladder, and poured an amount of water into the pot and stood over the stove listening to the gurgle of the coffee pot erupting water over the

course grounds as the propane hissed at the pot's behind. His arms were crossed and his dark hair a straw mat, hanging stiffly over his ears and his puffy red eyes. He had not shaved the past two days and he felt dirty. The strong urge to purge himself finally overcame him and he stumbled toward some brush where he had discarded three empty bottles of wine the night before. He scratched his balls and farted. Maybe this sight was one of the reasons he'd never been married.

He found a pair of gym shorts he had thrown casually onto the ground the night before and shook them, making sure no critter of a dangerous nature had made the shorts home, and he pulled these on. He found his river shoes and loosely pulled these on his feet.

The coffee pot hissed and he stumbled back over the rocky desert floor and poured himself a cup, burning his hands on the edges. He sipped impatiently and wished it to cool faster. He balanced the cup on a small boulder and fished a pack of cigarettes from a discarded shirt and he shook before he lit one and inhaled deeply. Morning was beginning as it always had regardless of the place he awoke. Slowly the darkness crept from his soul with the introduction of caffeine and nicotine. He gave himself the gift of self-gratification on a very regular basis and these two "ines" helped him to cope during the day until he could be generous to himself at night.

Birds tweeted and he wanted to tell them to fuck off because they were just too damned cheery this morning. He heated a skillet and threw on some bacon. As it sizzled, he cracked three eggs into the skillet and nursed them until the bacon was still rubbery and the eggs were over-easy.

He decided he would swim this morning after his breakfast and a couple more cups.

There was no newspaper and no Internet so the world, thankfully, would not exist until later in the day as he contemplated the soft sound of the nearby cold stream.

He slipped on the shirt and from the tent, his knapsack, and tightened his river shoes for the hike to the swimming hole, a half mile away. After a quarter mile, he crossed a crystal stream that appeared as fifteen feet of plate glass surrounded by maples; it was only a couple inches deep and spread over river rock to the dusty road on the other side. He hiked for a while up a rise and then back into a valley where that same stream had turned and narrowed and was eating away at the sandstone bed in which it flowed. The elevation dropped drastically as did the stream and the water rushed and then crashed over a blanket of sandstone and into a turquoise swimming hole no larger than the average backyard pool. The pool did not continue above ground, disappearing through fractured rocks below surface and reemerging a hundred yards away, spilling into the Devil's River. It was littered with jagged rocks the size of compact cars and the pool was deep and was similar to the pool in his dreams. As he turned the bend a great blue heron standing at waters edge, four feet in height, was startled and quickly shot out across the pool, gliding up a rise and over the bluff.

He removed his shoes and clothes and jumped in. The icy cold stung his body and he shot back to the surface with a primal scream and began laughing, finally feeling alive. He swam back to the edge, wiping his face and swam back to the center, diving to the bottom and up again. He floated on his back, the deep blue sky cloudless as the sun climbed higher. The coolness of the morning had already given way to the dry desert heat and the air sucked the water from his face, tingling like little bubbles bursting.

Floating on his back, he saw a dark indentation in an eight hundred-foot red clay bluff fifty feet from the ground. It was a cave entrance to a cavern system he had explored once before. He pulled himself from the water, allowed the heat to dry him in a matter of moments and got dressed.

Whitte had purchased this tract, adjacent to ten thousand acres he already owned, three months before and had only had the time to retreat to it twice. This was a place in Texas where desert meets low plains, where mountain meets desert. It was a melding of bad terrain joining to become a devil's beauty unto itself. The scrub and mountain flowers, the cold at night and the heat and dryness of the day, the water where life was nurtured and the complete and utter aloneness—which, suffice to say, was a dreamed asylum from the ailments of civilization—danced together and brought him to a moment where his duties were behind him, albeit for only this moment, and time was suspended above the darkness.

The climb went fast and he pulled himself to a ledge and into a narrow passage. Beyond the passage was a large cave with a dusty limestone floor and deep inside he could hear trickling water. The smooth walls, pasty white and gray, held primitive art in washed red, white and brown. The cave had shielded these scenes from the elements and they appeared as fresh as the day they had been painted; it was three thousand year-old graffiti. He traced his finger the over-exaggerated lines of humans appearing as something a child with a taste for LSD had drawn. There were twenty or so small stick figures, their arms outstretched, beneath a larger headless figure dressed in white robes. It was the tribe's shaman and he held his arms in a cross and above him was a reddish-brown sphere, no doubt the sun.

Now he was drawn to the water.

He retrieved a flashlight from his knapsack and ventured into the dark. There was a passage that became narrow and he was just able to squeeze through into a larger borrow where the sound of water increased. The floor of the cave dropped over a ledge and he shone the light down. Fifteen feet below was the floor of a second chamber and he could see stalagmites and stalactites forming deeper into the cave. The water was just beyond the reach of the light so he carefully climbed down the wall onto the floor. He shined the light to the ceiling and saw soot rings, much like the ones he had witnessed in Belize more than two decades before. This is where early man got stoned off his ass with peyote and let their gods enter their souls and lead them astray.

He tentatively crept forward around a short bend and found a fast flowing stream emerging from the right and falling into a hole about three feet in diameter, five yards away. Beyond was a faint light—another entrance to this cave structure.

He shuddered at the thought of losing his footing and disappearing into the hole so he slowly worked himself across the stream and to the other side. He bent down and scooped water into his hands and drank it. Beside a slight taste of minerals, this water was pure. He turned off the flashlight and the light beyond the spring was brighter, leading him further into the cave. He turned his flashlight back on and tiptoed through the puddles on the floor until he reached a dead-end. Above was a three-foot wide sinkhole that seemed to narrow as it ascended to a disc of light. Using his back and feet, he “walked” up the wall and as he neared the top he was able to reach up and pull loose stone and dirt until the opening was large enough to pull himself through. With dirt and grit in his eyes and hair,

he emerged and climbed onto a ledge that was bright with a high blue sky. Below was the deep blue lazy Devil's River as it made its way toward Lake Amistad on the Mexican border; above, the mountain reached its peak at eight hundred feet.

He removed a small pickaxe from his bag and probed the surrounding rocks. When he found a suitable crevice, he jammed a power cam into a crevice and jerked on it until he was sure it would hold. He then unfurled a climbing rope, clamped it to the cam and then tossed the loose end into the cavern below. He wasn't going to trust the footing on his return trip. Once satisfied with the hold, he sat down and took a breath.

He heard rubble being displaced behind him and a big horn sheep pawed at the rocks and studied him for what seemed an eternity and then bolted down the mountain toward a herd of three more that, following his lead, leapt beyond a ridge and out of sight.

We know what happened in Belize.

It came in the mail with no return address and postmarked in Arizona of all places. It had been a single sheet of ink jet paper, typed in Times Roman.

Who were *We*? Somewhere out there was someone who knew the effect it would have on him; someone knew the torrential downpour of darkness it would unleash.

His father had been correct. He told Jack that once he was gone, a game would begin. After the accident, Jack had almost forgotten that particular conversation but, more than three years later; it came like a thief in the night and stole his false sense of normalcy, if there really was such a thing.

With his mind completely clear, he now knew what he had to do. He would have to be like the mountain sheep; leap over the edge and run down the side of a mountain and

pray to God he knew how to stop before cascading out of control.