

43 The Garden of Eden

The fer-de-lance is called the serpent by the St. Lucians for good reason: It is the evil of Eden. One strike can deliver 105mg of toxic juice, up to 310mg on a good day—for the snake, that is. Since it's lethal to humans at 50mg, one is DOA—dead on arrival—with the first strike. Capitulation is one's only defense for once it rears up into an "S" its strike happens so rapidly that prey won't realize it has been hit until the poison is unleashed, making its deadly rounds through a twisting, withering body. It can grow up to seven feet long and varies in color from gray brown to copper red. In a tropical forest, it is difficult to see.

"It's slicker and quicker than a greased pig," Robert had told her, "but don't worry, they don't usually make it up into the mountains."

Don't worry?

"But it's been dry lately"

Tiffany hated snakes more so than the idea of drowning; each presented a particularly painful way to exit life but venom systematically burned down bodily functions as death slowly wrapped its excruciating veil around one's body. She had brought the Beretta and with each agonizingly guarded step through the jungle, she was trigger-happy for anything slithering. As soon as she ducked under a low-lying branch of a calabash tree—it's low hung fruit resembling green coconuts—her fear of the Devil's device was washed away by the crashing sound of water.

Pushing through the tentacles of an island fig tree, Tiffany discovered a deep, dark blue pool. Water had cut through rock and jungle and spilled into the pool from fifteen feet above and then snaked its way back down the mountain. Various palms competed with red-flowering flamboyants, ironwoods, and coco plums, all stretching their branches and leaves toward the bright light of heaven above: A true Garden of Eden, paradise found. All that was missing was a naked Adam.

She climbed out onto a ledge that stood a couple of feet above the pool and sat, listening to the splashing water that drew her mind a million miles away, relaxing her. The doubts and fears that had plagued her for weeks were still there but she let them float away on the slight breeze settling into the jungle.

While she sympathized with Robert Whitte being cut off from his previous life, the notion of living a lonely life in exile was dispelled after seeing the “swimming attire” that was in the middle drawer of the chest in the spare room; she decided that her aggressively low cut panties were as modest as a preacher’s wife by comparison. She never understood women who wore G-string type bikinis. What was the point of having a string up your butt crack? And the tops that covered only their nipples? Why just go ahead and go naked. Within Tiffany’s line of logic, there was more respect in doing that.

Her body wasn’t a knock out; she had never had any illusions of that. Her breasts were firm but spread too far away from each. She always wondered whether there was a correlation between her left breast being slightly larger than her right and the fact that she was left-handed—the things we think about in the privacy of our own minds. Her stomach was flat, for the most part, but in spite of the crunches and long runs and occasional weight

lifting, she still had a small pooch below her belly button that threatened to grow if she let it. Her torso was squatty, which she didn't really like. Her ass was flat and square and she didn't fill out jeans the way a man wants. Her toes were long and ugly; a couple were askew from where she had run into the side of a coffee table bare-footed. Her fingers didn't match her short frame; they looked like they should be on the hands of a long, elegant woman not a stubby midget. And then there were her legs: long for her body but lacking any true muscle definition. Her skin had a tendency to be splotchy but at least she had been able to get some sun, recently.

And above all else, her feet were flat.

Even though she wasn't *too* tough on herself, not *too* overly critical she also didn't give a damn who saw her naked. So, she discarded her clothes and dove into the water.

It was unbelievably cold at first; her teeth actually chattered but after a few moments, it became refreshing. She floated on her back, hearing her breathing but very little else. It was an isolation tank but instead of feeling alone, she felt like she was an integral cog in the wheel of existence. Small raindrops began to slip from the sky and pattered on the water, and then rain came heavier. She heard a clap of thunder and as quickly as the shower began, it ended and sunshine slipped through the opening above the water.

She climbed onto a rock island in the middle of the pool, nestled by the waterfall and rested on a water-worn patch of rock that was quickly drying from the downpour and closed her eyes. She heard a rumble in the distance and then as it drew closer, she realized it was a plane. She opened her eyes in time to see what looked like a flying boat buzz about 300 feet above her. It was black all over except for the large hull that was yellow. As

quickly as it had appeared, it disappeared behind the jungle wall behind her. The intrusion made her uncomfortable and she glanced around and, secure that she was all alone, laid her head back on the rock and closed her eyes, listening to the shower of water spilling over the cliff above her.

After about ten minutes in the sun, she was hot and rolled over and fell into the water. She sank to the bottom and swam beneath the water, shooting over the sand pebbles. Time seemed to stand still. Memories from childhood crept into her mind: her father's death, her infatuation with a young Jack Whitte, then college, the FBI, her marriage and divorce to Mark Bennetti, he talking her into OIC and then her life stopped. Amber Brown had died. Now she was Tiffany Marks. Tiffany Marks loved no one and no one loved Tiffany Marks.

It is like the old conundrum about the falling tree and whether it makes a sound when it hits if there is no one in the forest to hear it.

Are tears shed underwater?

She stayed below until her lungs were about to burst and then she pulled herself through the water until she broke surface. She screamed, muted but a scream nonetheless. She felt nothing inside and she wasn't sure she wanted to feel anything else inside ever again. But she wanted love. She wanted Jack.

She pulled herself back onto the rock and lay back again but this time, she fell asleep.

She didn't know how long she had been asleep. It could have been just minutes but she doubted it; the sunlight had shifted from straight above to the edge of the canopy. She was sweating so she rolled over and splashed into the water and sank to the bottom and slowly floated upwards. This time she didn't cry. The earlier scream had been a catharsis and, generally, she felt reborn. She stayed in the water for a good ten minutes and then dragged herself back onto her rock. She sat up and watched the water cascade from above and crash into the pool.

She wondered what their next plan of action would be. For whatever reason, Mr. Whitte hadn't wanted her there when his business associate came calling but it had been okay for Horse to remain? She would never understand the logic of men; they always wanted to shield women from conflict and harm and she suspected that had been what this Croswell had brought with him. She didn't care for the way he had handled it though she was now glad she had had the opportunity of aloneness. She needed it. It recharged her. Now she was ready to go back and find out what the hell was going on. As she stood, getting ready to dive back into the water, she heard a sound from behind her.

"Don't get dressed on my account," came a haunting voice.

She held her breath for a heart beat and then turned quickly. Heat poured through her heart and leapt into her throat and she couldn't speak. Tears came into her eyes.

He was sitting on the ledge at the edge of the pool. He had a mango in one hand and a pocketknife in the other and was slicing back the tough skin to get to the sweet fruit. Jack Whitte appeared that he had been sitting there for a while.

"I like your haircut," she said.

Whitte nodded. "That's the first thing that flew into your mind?"

She shifted on her feet. "I'm nervous."

"I really want to hit you right now," Whitte said as he peeled back a flap of mango with the blade. "I've never hit a woman before." After a pause, he added, "You'd be the first."

Her face turned defiant, like a kid caught in a lie. "Then hit me. I can take it."

"I can't."

"I deserve it," she said, teary-eyed. "If any woman ever deserved to be hit, I am that woman."

Whitte nodded in half-hearted agreement. "Maybe," he said as he slid a slice of mango into his mouth. It was sweet and for a moment, nothing was more important than the tangy syrupiness that began to trickle down his throat. "No. You don't owe me anything, especially letting me hit you." The mango was really, really good. "You were just doing your job."

She shook her head as tears came faster.

He took another slice of mango. "Why did the girl have to die?"

"She didn't."

"She didn't as in she didn't deserve to die?"

Tiffany smiled as she wiped at her eyes. "No, she's quite alive and well. She's at a secure compound near Lake Tahoe. It's where we'll take you right now when you're ready."

Whitte tossed the mango and the knife into the water and stood on the boulder.

“Can I kiss you?”

“I wish you would,” she sobbed and jumped into the water.

Whitte tore off his shirt and slipped out of his khaki pants and dove in and they met in the middle and Amber Brown finally got to make love in the water.