

46 Trapped

There was a roar of water and Whitte dove in. Somewhere in the darkness the girl was thrashing about and he had to save her but this time, someone held his leg. He struggled, kicking out at the unseen force. He felt like one of his kicks connected but he was held firm. He turned, water rushed into his nose and he saw him and he convulsed in terror. It was Azra'il, the Angle of Death. Then there was a gunshot and he was thrust back into the world of the living.

Tiffany lay next to him, her eyes closed. His father was slouched in the front seat, snoring. He heard a twig crack and he shot a glance toward the jungle. Johnson was picking his way through the brush. Whitte quietly slid from the pickup bed and walked toward Johnson.

“Was there a gunshot?”

Johnson shook his head. “None I heard.”

Whitte ran his hand through his hair then rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Must have been a dream.”

“I think they’re getting close. They’ve been driving up and down this road since dawn.”

“I thought my father was supposed to spell you.”

“He did. It was my turn again.” He stretched. “I think we need to go down and force that lock. We need to move. I’ll call Muller and have him fly to that airport your father

mentioned.”

Whitte edged his pants down and peeled back the tape. He glanced at the cell phone being used to block the RFID chip signal. “It’s dead.”

“I’ll get another phone,” Johnson said, moving toward the truck. Whitte grabbed his arm.

“Look this is stupid. These guys are no fools. They’ll have both airports watched.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“A diversion.”

Jonson glanced down at the chip. “You want me to cut that out of you?”

“Oh, fuck no. My scream would bring them down on us from a mile away,” he mused.

“You’re not going to turn yourself in.”

“No, of course not.” He pushed the tape back over his pelvis. “Show me how to pair this thing with another phone. I’ll climb up the cliff and make my way to the crater. Dad told me there are tour buses galore coming and going up there. I’ll hang out and when the tours start, I’ll disconnect the phone for about ten minutes, let them get a good reading on the chip then I’ll connect it, slip on a bus and go back to Castries. Crosswell’s there with the company plane. You guys go on to Vieux Fort. Catch the CIA plane.”

“You said they’d be watching the airports.”

“Not if they get a reading on the chip.”

Johnson nodded for a while, thinking it through. “Why don’t you let me go with you?”

“They don’t want you. They want my Dad,” Whitte nodded. “I trust you. Get him the hell out of here. Take him back to Houston. Crosswell and I will meet you there. That’s your jurisdiction. You can bring us in with no questions asked.”

“I don’t like this Whitte.”

“What, you think they’ll kill me? The worst that will happen is that they’ll take me back to that island. Tiffany knows where it is. Send in the Calvary. But I won’t stand a chance if you don’t get my father to safety.”

Johnson nodded. He held out his hand to Whitte. “You be careful.”

“Just don’t let Tiffany follow. Get her out of here. Promise me,” he said, shaking the Ranger’s hand.

A swarm of gnats settled over the back of the pickup and with a gulp of air, Tiffany probably inhaled around fifty of the creatures. She coughed. “Yuck.” She sat up. Jack was gone but Mr. Whitte was still sound asleep. She climbed out of the bed just as Horse was hiking back from the parking lot below the waterfall.

“We need to get a move on it. The caretaker just unlocked the gate.”

Tiffany stretched. “I’ll wake up sleeping beauty.” She ambled to the truck door and nudged Robert through the open window. She turned back to Johnson. “Where’s Jack?”

Johnson scrunched his face. He glanced over at Robert. “Move over, I’ll drive.”

“Horse, were the hell is Jack?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Is he down there using the bathroom?” Horse didn’t answer. “Goddamnit Horse. Where did he go?”

The climb was exhausting. The footholds and crevices were slimy from the water and several times she thought she’d fall. It didn’t help that Horse kept screaming at her to come down. With the final three feet to go, she swung her arm over the top and her hand came down on something slimy. Then it moved.

She pulled her hand back and almost lost her footing. She peaked over the edge. A fer-de-lance was trapped in the flow of the stream; its tail was wrapped around a small limb hanging out over the falls. She couldn’t pull herself over without being bit. She looked back to the ground. Horse was glaring at her.

“Come down.”

Now she wanted to but she was too tired. There was no way she’d make it back without falling. She glanced to her left and saw a mangle of dead brush and debris from a past flood. Knowing there could be a snake in there as well, she held her breath and grabbed a small limb and yanked at it. It came free. She swung back toward the snake and wacked at it with the limb. All it seemed to do was piss it off even more. Well, she thought, at least she’d be dead before she hit the ground. She pushed herself up further and swatted at it again. This time it reared back and launched itself toward her. She ducked and it went flying off the cliff toward Horse.

“Goddamnit!” he flew back. The snake hit the water and swam harmlessly away.

She looked back at Horse and smiled triumphantly. Horse shook his head. “Be careful.” He climbed into the truck and they drove down the trail to the parking lot below the falls.

She followed the stream and the further she got the worse the smell burrowed into her olfactory. It reminded her of fourth grade and Billy Bartlett. She had a crush on him but he wanted nothing to do with her—she was a cootie carrier. One day on the playground, he decided to make it painfully clear that he wanted nothing to do with her. He doused her with stink perfume he’d gotten at a novelty shop. She threw up and her first boy adventure, like so many afterwards, was a complete failure. And after a couple of more yards and twenty-five years later, she threw up again.

She had scratches all over her face and arms; she’d had to remove thorns and burrs from all over her body but her perseverance paid off as she neared an opening at the top of the rise and she almost threw up again. The stench was so overpowering that her eyes watered and she had a difficult time seeing anything with great detail. She knelt at the edge of the jungle, using her shirttail to continually wipe at her eyes until she heard a motor straining up a hill to the parking lot where she was; it was a giant tour bus. She pushed herself back into the brush and waited for it to pull up in front of her. It was then when she spied Jack across the way from her.

He was kneeling behind a narrow guard shake built by the entrance to the crater. His attention was on the cell phone Horse had given him. She could tell he was trying to pair the device with the RFID chip. Staying to the jungle, Tiffany worked her way around to the shack.

“Damn it!” Jack said as Tiffany stepped from the undergrowth. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“This is a bad plan, Jack.” She glanced at the cell phone. “How long have you had that off?”

“About thirty minutes. I can’t get the damn thing to work.”

She grabbed the phone from him. “It’s because it’s already paired with another device. They’ve locked on. Here,” she said taking the tinfoil he still held. She slapped it over his wound. They knelt like that for a moment. Jack was staring deep into her eyes. She was returning the gaze. He reached out and kissed her. With her free hand she grabbed him around his neck. “Damn it Jack. We could have gotten away.” She held the cell phone now and began working through the menu. She removed the tinfoil and tried to pair it again. This time it worked.

As the bus squeaked to a halt they could hear excited conversations among the passengers and a deep, husky woman’s voice booming from a loudspeaker. “Ya’s need ta be mindful of da walkways and don’t go off da trail.”

The doors squeaked opened and the thirty or so passengers began filing off. A few children broke from the pack and dashed toward the opened crater, their parents screaming after them as the children thumbed their noses and continued on. Tiffany and Whitte

glanced at each other, stepped from behind the shack and fell in line.

The steam could be seen beyond an ashen rise above the parking lot and they progressed to a wooden walkway leading up among pine trees and neatly groomed paths. The sulfur spewed and those passengers who were not prepared gagged. They followed the tourists up the short stairwell and onto an asphalt deck that then led to a wide walkway that bordered the crater. Whitte pulled Tiffany back as they allowed the rest of the passengers to pass.

“Okay, now what?” she asked him.

Whitte felt into his back pocket and pulled out two one hundreds, three twenties and a few tens—all he had. “I guess we join the tour.”

The bus driver was lagging behind, no doubt bored by the whole affair. As she approached, Whitte smiled and held out a hand.

“Is there anyway we can join your tour?” he asked hopefully.

The woman examined the grimy pair with mud-encrusted knees, various scrapes and opened wounds. Just as she was about to pull away, Whitte held out the money. “I’m sorry, our car broke down last night and we hiked through the woods. I just want to get back to Castries and rejoin our group there. I hope it won’t be any trouble.”

She looked at the money, glanced around the parking lot and took the bills from him and smiled. She pocketed the money and shook her head and walked back to the bus.

Whitte watched her leave.

They walked to catch up to the last of the stragglers and made their way to the large path that bordered the crater. The barren, lifeless area was about one and a half football

fields in length and 80 yards wide with ashen gray, pink and yellow splotches around severe outcroppings of beige rocks. To the left was a brewing caldron of deep gray gravy that could easily have hidden a VW Bug. Large bubbles spewed and burst. To the right was a 30-foot diameter crater encrusted with gray and yellow material, spewing steam in lazy bursts. Littered around were smaller, bubbling pots of gray mud, the thought of swimming in one terrifying.

“... and we used to allow visitors to walk inside the crater but one of our guides, back in the 1950s, slipped and the crust gave way and he spilled into one of the caldrons. Needless to say, we don't allow our guests to do this any more.”

One of the children who had finally been corralled spoke up. “Did he die?”

The guide shook her head. “No, much, much worse,” she said and paused for dramatic effect. “He lived.”

Whitte shook his head to get the image of a scalded man from his mind. He pulled at Tiffany. “Come on, let's get on the bus.” He held her arm as they stepped back down the stairs and toward the bus. Whitte glanced down the hill, toward a lower parking lot about eighty yards away. A camouflaged Toyota Land Cruiser and pulled into the lot. A man in military camouflage stood, speaking with a woman in a yellow blouse and navy blue pants. She was shaking her head and then she pointed up toward the bus. The man followed her gaze, jumped into the jeep and they drove toward the tour busses.

St. Lucia, like most of the island nations of the Caribbean, does not have a standing military. They do, however, have a paramilitary police force call the Special Services Unit that works closely with foreign law enforcement agencies to curtail smuggling and, most

recently, the flow of terrorists. And, as Whitte saw two white Jeep Wranglers pull into the lower parking lot and begin following the Land Cruiser up, he realized that Frank Wright must have used his FBI credentials to gain access to the SSU.

Whitte pulled Tiffany behind a tree as he watched the Land Cruiser pull up to the bus. “Shit. We’re done for.”

The SSU vehicle drew even with the tour bus and the officer got out and spoke with the driver of the other bus. Satisfied with whatever the man had said, they drove back down to the lower lot and then blocked the drive with the Land Cruiser. Tiffany pulled her Berretta Storm from the back of her waistband.

“Yeah, we’re really screwed. I’m sure they’re just waiting for our friends now.”

The bus driver walked by them and shook her head with a nervous smile. She walked to the tour guide and spoke into her ear.

“Okay, folks. Sorry, but we’ve been asked to re-board the bus. I’m sorry we have to cut this short but you’ll be able to walk around at the waterfall next.”

Tiffany and Whitte, still partially shielded by the tree, watched as the bus was boarded and turned around and drove back to the guard station forty yards below them. The Land Cruiser backed up, allowing the bus to pull even and then one of the SSUs boarded the bus, no doubt looking for the two fugitives. At the far end of the parking lot, the two Wranglers drove in. The lead car briefly stopped and a man leaned out and spoke to one of the uniformed police who pointed toward the crater’s entrance. Whitte shook his head. “I don’t know what to do Tiffany. I guess we can make a run for it and try to make it back to the waterfall.”

Tiffany smiled and reached up and kissed Whitte. One last kiss for the condemned, Whitte thought. To the left was dense vegetation that would take a machete to get through and to the right was the path down to the parking area. Just then a man in slacks and sports shirt ran from the brush and looked the twenty yards up to where Whitte and Tiffany stood partially hidden. He came around into a shooting position and yelled, "Freeze!"

Tiffany spun around. Suddenly there was a release that Tiffany had never felt before. She would usually be the one spouting the commands for she trusted no one but herself. Not now, though. She trusted Jack. "Jack, what do you want to do?"

The two Jeeps were now speeding from the lower parking lot. He glanced back at the man holding the gun. There was no clear shot so he grabbed Tiffany and pulled her behind another tree and then they burst out onto the asphalt trail leading to a scenic overlook to the crater. He heard the Jeeps pull up and screech to a halt and then car doors flying open and instructions being shouted.

If he could just get them to the overlook.

He had seen a trail to the left that would, hopefully, lead them back down the mountain and into dense vegetation where they could regroup and decide their next move. Then there was a gunshot and he froze. Above their position he thought he saw a head bob over a ridge. They had only one possibility of escape now and that was only if they really wouldn't shoot either of them.

Capture or burn? A wood rail fence separated them from the crater. He looked back and they had the angle. Shit, he was going to die one way or the other. He reached out and snatched the gun from Tiffany's hand. "I'm going to run. They won't kill me and they

won't kill you either. Stay."

But Tiffany ran toward the rail and jumped it first, rolling down into the crater. Shit, thought Jack as he followed.

Up close the caldrons were terrifying. Mud spit out from them and Whitte knew that the temperature was enough to cook him alive. Across the volcano, probably two hundred feet Whitte guessed, was a grass-covered knoll with pines and vines on top. They could hide up there. As they ran gingerly, crust crunching beneath their feet, Tiffany tripped and burned her hand on a rock. Whitte grabbed her and pulled her along.

"I said freeze, Goddamnit!"

Whitte turned around. "Keep running Tiffany."

The agent leapt over the rail and landed on his feet and ran out onto the crater.

Whitte turned and took aim at the agent. "You're going to let her go and I'll go quietly."

"No, Jack," she said, stopping.

"Run, Goddamnit!" he yelled, turning to urge her to keep running.

The agent stooped, took aim and fired at Tiffany, catching her in the left thigh and spinning her on her back, mere feet from a pool of bubbling mud. Whitte turned and ran toward her. He pulled the slide on the top of the gun, cocking it while continuing his gait toward Tiffany. As he neared her, he spun around and in one quick motion fell into a crouch with his left knee on the ground and took aim over his right knee. As the agent continued to run, Whitte let off an well-aimed round that struck the agent in his left thigh, spinning him back to his left and onto a ledge just above the largest of the three pools. He turned and helped Tiffany to her feet.

“Okay?” he asked tenderly.

“Remember, I’ve been shot before,” she cried out as he lifted her and slightly pushed her toward the grassy hill. He turned back to where the agent had fallen.

“Help me!” he cried out. The man’s leg was dangling over the cauldron and Whitte could see that the crust around the pool was beginning to crumble.

He stopped and looked back to Tiffany. “Keep running!” and then he turned and ran back to the disabled agent.

“Whitte, stop!” he could hear others running up from the parking lot. With his right hand firmly holding the gun, he held out his left hand. “I’ll pull you out but throw your gun into the mud.” The man did so and Whitte grabbed his freed hand and pulled him up to level land and then turned back to Tiffany and began to run in her direction.

Suddenly another agent appeared from the grassy hill above them, his gun trained on Tiffany. “Whitte, it’s over. Drop it.”

Special Agent Frank Wright, with an ear-to-ear grin, walked out onto the crater. Whitte dropped the gun.

Game over.

“You led me to where your father lived. That’s all we needed.” He walked over to Whitte and picked up the gun. “I can finally wash my hands of this whole affair.” He pistol whipped Whitte, smiled and motioned for one of his men to handcuff Whitte and Tiffany Marks.

