

51 The Nightmare's End

Cosmic coincidence or manifest destiny? Jack Whitte believed in neither. There is no rhyme or reason to the universe. People act. Sometimes they make absolutely brilliant decisions and sometimes incredibly stupid ones but the ninety-nine point nine percent of all actions fall desperately in between. One act sets in motion a chaotic extrapolation, much like a pebble tossed into a pond, releasing ripples that reverberate from the epicenter. People, evil people, set off a chain reaction that encapsulated Jack and Anais and Amber in a deadly dance that would end momentarily, one way or another. Anais, as far as Jack knew, remained in the room that overlooked the bay, still sobbing, still mulling a future without the hands of cruelty wrapped tightly around her neck. She had children, Jack's children, and hopefully, she could build a life with them by her side.

Jack had no one except the woman that the Angel of Death was taking from him. So he ran through the jungle, a desperate run that would either kill him or make him stronger. Either way made no difference to him just so long as the woman lived and the Angel died. That was success to him.

He caught them in the open. They were on the beach where Jack and Britta had talked and made a friendship, where they had made love in the water just offshore. He had regretted that act almost as immediately as it was done but he was weak and it had no bearing on anything at this moment.

Amber was ten yards away from Azra'il, lying on a beach. She was naked with the

exception of the white bandage that was wrapped around the gunshot wound to her thigh. He couldn't tell whether she was alive or dead and his heart raced even faster than he thought was possible. Maybe he would die just getting to the moment.

Azra'il was searching the offshore horizon. He held something in his right hand, which Whitte assumed was a gun, so he pulled up, short of the sand, shielded behind an island fig. They were no more than forty yards from each other, forty yards to live, forty yards to die. Then Azra'il brought the object near his mouth and spoke into it. Whitte roared around the fig and brought the gun to bear on the man and fired several shots, kicking up water as the shots sailed wide to the left. Azra'il dove for the sand. He spider crawled to Amber and settled in behind her. Whitte charged. Azra'il reached out and grabbed Amber and wrapped a beefy arm around her and stood with little effort. Whitte stopped.

"Drop her," Whitte ordered.

In the moonlight, bright and revealing, Whitte could see the beast smile as he began to back away from Whitte. As Whitte drew near, Azra'il snuggled one arm around Amber's neck and the other positioned on her head. One snap from the lumbering arms and Amber, if still alive, would be no more. Whitte dropped the gun to his side. Azra'il backed into the jungle, onto the path that led to the cliff, and disappeared from sight. Whitte followed, staying well back.

He followed the two of them up the trail. The chase had slowed to a crawl; the whole while Azra'il backed up the trail, holding Amber like a lifeless ragdoll, inching to the top. Whitte didn't know what the final play would be though he held faith that he would

retain the upper hand. The adrenaline that was pumping through Whitte's veins was beginning to ebb. Pain shot through his nervous system, threatening to shut him down. He wanted to cry as he breathed deeply, each breath searing with agony. He had only felt this amount of pain one time in his life and the cause was a mere twenty yards ahead. But pain has no memory and just knowing that if he survived, this too would pass reinforced his resiliency and for a brief moment he even considered sacrificing Amber just to gain his revenge: just pump the remaining shots into the blob of flesh above him, maybe saving one shot for himself. He believed in heaven and he believed he would eventually be there and so would Amber. But the rage subsided as the physical exertion began to tear at the fibers of revenge. So he trudged onward.

When he turned the bend in the trail and reached the summit, he could hear Azra'il speaking. Off in the distance he heard the screaming of a speedboat coming around the side of the island, making its way past the beach and toward the cliff. Azra'il was standing at the edge, next to the boulder where Britta had sunbathed, still clutching Amber in his left arm. Gravel crunched under Whitte's shoes and Azra'il turned.

Whitte aimed the gun at Azra'il's head.

"How's your asshole?" Azra'il's deep voice reverberated through time.

Fury built up behind Whitte's mouth like water in a teakettle. He screamed out.

Azra'il laughed. With one easy motion, he swung Amber out over the edge and let go.

Whitte screamed more and began rabidly pulling the trigger. Three shots rang out and then nothing. Click, click, click.

Azra'il laughed. "Goodbye my friend."

He turned and dove from the cliff. Whitte began running immediately, calculating his own death as he raced forward.

It is truly amazing the amount of information that flows through the mind in the flash between life and death. The water around the island was shallow, except in the bay. To his left was the beach where he had to walk thirty yards across the bed of sand until he reached chest level. But he had not swum near the cliff. He remembered there was a sizable jagged rock between him and the beach that had calved from the cliff. He wondered how close that was to where Amber had dropped. He was hoping for a miracle here. Then he considered the thousands of years that this cliff stood guard over the treacherous seas and the hundreds of hurricanes that had probably hit this very spot, churning the sea into a frenzy, dragging sand and rock into the deadly depths. It was probably like a giant scoop, burrowing out a deep pool beneath the towering cliff above. God he hoped so. Azra'il must have known or he wouldn't have jumped, with his freedom so close at hand.

He had estimated the cliff to be around three to four stories tall, maybe five. A man could survive such a fall onto a parking lot; it had been documented. The emphasis, however, was on *could*. The odds weren't very favorable. Water, if hit at the wrong angle, could be as hard as cement so he *could* survive but there was an even higher probability that he wouldn't. Unless he entered feet first.

He was scared; probably more scared than any other time in his life. He was facing death. He had considered the end many times before, even, on occasion, praying for it. It would be the final escape from the darkness. But now the darkness had been lifted. Anais lived. He couldn't save her because she was never in any danger, not from Azra'il. He

worked for her father. It had been a wasted twenty-five years of his life, always fretting over an outcome that, in reality, he could never have influenced.

Lemons into lemonade.

Abigail wasn't dead because Amber was just now hitting the water on the other side of the quickly approaching ledge. He hadn't had control in Belize. He hadn't control in Nassau. He hadn't control on Genesis Cay, nor Antigua, nor St. Lucia. He hadn't control over anything in his life but at this moment, for this briefest of time in his entire life, he had control.

He was now held in suspension over the water. His feat had left the earthly bonds of gravity and he was floating. It was dark below, it was dark above and all around him and the darkness was blinding and thoughts had left him and he was now falling more rapidly than he had ever fallen in his life. The hard water was approaching faster and faster and his heart burst from his chest and he tried to take a breath before he hit but it was like someone had squeezed him all over, suddenly, fiercely, with no mercy. His mind floated into obscurity but his body sank like lead and he could feel the air sucking from his lungs. He kept expecting to hit bottom; he hoped he could hit bottom for he could then use his legs to propel himself up but the acceleration halted and for a moment he was held in limbo. He opened his eyes and the salt burned just as his lungs burst. He made a mad scramble up, pulling at the water like he was scrambling up a ladder in a sinking ship.

Time stopped. There was silence. He could see a light, dim, uninviting from above but he knew for that moment that was where he needed to be. And just as suddenly as time had stopped, it began again as he burst above the waves. The waves were strong and

punched at him and pulled at him, trying to drag him out to sea but he fought valiantly. He began to swim hard toward the rocks, knowing she was somewhere in that direction. To his left he heard splashing and there was the Angel of Death, alive and kicking toward a chugging motorboat about forty yards away. Whitte ignored this and dove.

The current was incredibly difficult to understand. As the waves crashed there was a sudden surge to the rocks but then as it subsided, there was suction coming from beneath, pulling at his body, trying to drag it to the unseen bottom. He realized that since she wasn't on the surface, she must have become caught in the battle between the waves and the rocks, beneath him.

It was a frantic search and time was stripping away. He was pushed back to the surface. What had he expected? To find her? To save her? Did he expect a happy ending? Then there was a flash beneath him. Something white. He calmed his heart and he realized that in the brightness of the moon he could see the bottom of the sea. It was difficult to tell how deep it was but there was hope. Where was the white flash? There, five yards to the left. He paddled hard and put his head underwater.

Whitte saw her body sinking beneath him and he rolled over and began scratching at the water, pulling himself deeper as she continued churning below. He was falling behind her, his eardrums being pierced by the crushing pressure as he sank deeper, being pulled by the twisting, angry water. The water burned his eyes and there was difficulty seeing her but he concentrated on the white of her bandages. It was the only thing he could see as the water attacked his eyes. He continued to claw, willing himself down and he was losing sight of her. *God, no*, he wanted to scream but he couldn't. His lungs were now fire

and his chest felt as if it were going to explode. He kept struggling, sinking and now he seemed to be aloft in the darkness of loneliness and he felt the helplessness creeping into his soul. He no longer could see her.

He had been here before. Not in the physical world but this was all too familiar as he realized it was a lost cause. She was gone.

He closed his eyes and began to make his peace. *Yes, open your mouth Jack. Let it be done.* A large air bubble crept up his leg and burst against his skin and he opened his eyes. She was there: awake, struggling. Her eyes were filled with terror and he could now see her clearly. He struggled with his buoyancy; he felt like it was as far down as he could go but he continued to claw at the water like he was clawing through dirt, trying to dig himself out of his grave. Five yards now, her hands were grasping out to him. One yard—*oh God, give me the strength.*

She reached up to him and scratched the skin from his wrist as she dug in and pulled herself close. He slid his hand over her wrist and grasped her tight. It no longer mattered whether he lived or died. He had saved her. He was saved. He turned upwards, the darkness beneath him, his nightmares finally at an end, and he swam into the light.